On The Universal Plan

Sam Nemri

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Preface – Why?

"For it is owing to their wonder that men both now begin and at first began to philosophize; they wondered originally at the obvious difficulties, then advanced little by little and stated difficulties about the greater matters, e.g. about the phenomena of the moon and those of the sun and of the stars, and about the origin of the universe."
—Aristotle, *Metaphysics (Book I, Part II)*

Pause with me for a moment, and imagine yourself rising slowly above the Earth. From orbit, the planet gleams with oceans of blue, continents of green and brown, and shifting swirls of white cloud. It looks peaceful, fragile, a shimmering jewel set in the blackness of space. But within that fragile shell of atmosphere lies a world overflowing with life and story.

In Paris, lights spill across the avenues as the Eiffel Tower glitters over cafés where friends gather in laughter, glasses clinking late into the night. In Shanghai, neon blazes against the sky as trains rush and millions cross bridges, a river of humanity in constant motion. On Mount Kilimanjaro, clouds drift over slopes where climbers trace paths through lush forest, alpine meadows, and barren volcanic rock toward the snow-capped summit. In Jerusalem, the ancient stones glow bright in the evening sun, the murmur of prayers in Hebrew and Arabic audible everywhere.

And within these vast human tapestries are moments of deep intimacy: a young mother rocking her baby gently, singing a lullaby as the child's breathing slows and sleep

overtakes them; a group of teenagers—three boys and two girls—sitting together in the night, speaking their fears and hopes aloud for the first time, their voices soft with vulnerability; a solitary, determined student bent over books, tracing lines with weary fingers in a late-night library; a scholar turning the delicate pages of a manuscript, connecting with the words of long-forgotten minds; a scientist in a quiet lab, recalibrating instruments, repeating an experiment for the hundredth time, inching forward toward discovery.

Beyond the human world lies the Earth's natural splendor. The Alps rise in jagged glory, sunlight painting their peaks pink and gold at dawn. The Himalayas stand even higher, mountains so vast they seem less like a mountain range and more like an entire world of its own. Oceans breathe across the globe, waves rising and breaking in endless rhythm, their silver surfaces glinting in moonlight. Forests awaken each morning with the songs of birds, squirrels leaping branch to branch, deer stepping softly through the undergrowth. At night those same woods turn to mystery: silence spreads, the air grows cool, an owl hoots across the darkness, and above the canopy a thousand stars burn in the ink-black sky. And farther south, Antarctica lies stark and immense, its winds howling across endless plains of ice, while on isolated outposts like Bouvet Island, no voices are heard at all—only seabirds and the crash of surf.

Lift your gaze upward. The Moon hangs pale and watchful, its scarred surface reflecting softly on Earth's oceans, pulling tides in and out with unceasing rhythm. Beyond it blazes the Sun—a furnace of hydrogen and helium, its surface churning with storms of unimaginable scale. From its core, light takes thousands of years to reach the surface, only then to stream outward across space, giving warmth to

Earth, driving the winds, feeding the forests, sustaining every living thing.

Drift outward into the Solar System. Earth becomes one of many worlds orbiting the Sun. Mars moves red and desolate, its canyons dwarfing the Grand Canyon, its volcanoes taller than Mount Everest, its silence absolute. Jupiter looms immense, cloaked in storms, its Great Red Spot a tempest that has raged for centuries. Around it, moons whirl: Io wracked with eruptions, Europa hiding a secret ocean beneath ice, Ganymede etched with ridges and grooves. Saturn spins farther out, its magnificent rings glimmering like a frozen crown. Uranus tilts oddly on its side, rolling along its orbit, while Neptune's cobalt atmosphere seethes with winds faster than sound. At the outer edge, Pluto drifts in exile, a lonely wanderer circling at the threshold of interstellar space.

Now the Solar System fades, vanishing into the vastness of the Milky Way. Our galaxy stretches across 100,000 light-years, a grand spiral of hundreds of billions of stars. Nebulae glow like cosmic lanterns—the Eagle Nebula birthing new suns, the Crab Nebula spreading the remnants of a dead one. Pulsars beam like lighthouses, their signals sweeping the void. Star clusters sparkle like gems against the darkness. And at the galaxy's heart, hidden in shadow, a supermassive black hole—Sagittarius A*—holds everything in its grasp, bending even light itself.

Expand farther and our galaxy becomes but one in the Local Group. The Andromeda Galaxy glimmers nearby, vast and luminous, destined to collide and merge with the Milky Way in a slow dance of stars. The Magellanic Clouds, irregular galaxies glowing faintly, orbit like companions. Together, dozens of galaxies form our small neighborhood of the cosmos.

Beyond lie galaxy clusters, each holding thousands of galaxies bound in titanic webs of gravity. Superclusters stretch across space, woven together into filaments of unimaginable scale. Between them, voids gape—enormous expanses nearly empty of galaxies, true deserts of the cosmos. Here, some of the universe's most powerful beacons shine: quasars, the blazing hearts of young galaxies, where matter spirals into supermassive black holes, releasing more energy than entire galaxies of stars. Their light, ancient and fierce, crosses billions of years to reach us.

Step back farther still, and the universe itself reveals its grand design. Trillions of galaxies stretch in all directions, each teeming with suns and worlds, their combined light forming the cosmic tapestry. Finally, imagine the universe as a single object. Perhaps it is spherical, its surface curving back upon itself; perhaps it is flat, stretching into infinity. In every direction, galaxies flee from one another as space itself expands. And what's visible beyond this cosmos? Nothing. Not darkness, not emptiness, but true nothingness—no matter, no energy, not even space or time. Against this unthinkable backdrop, the universe itself appears like an island of being in a sea of absolute absence.

And here you hover, having traveled from the lullaby of a mother soothing her child to the cataclysm of galaxies colliding. From the laughter of friends to the roar of quasars. From the silence of forests to the silence of intergalactic voids. All of it—every life, every star, every galaxy—is bound together in this one universe, a single, beautiful, and magnificent whole. But *why? Why is it there at all? What does it all mean?*

The desire to know is almost unbearable. Whole galaxies spin and collide while we live out our brief human decades. To be human is to stand on the edge of an abyss so vast it seems designed to humble us. And yet, here we are. Small, fragile, and fleeting, but conscious. We alone among the creatures of Earth can look at the night sky and ask not only, *What is it?* but *Why is it?* That question, once felt, refuses to let go. If there exist rational beings in other worlds, then they have doubtless asked the same question. It is inescapable.

But here lies the great irony. Despite the enormity of our situation, despite the grandeur of the universe and the pressing weight of mortality, most of us live as though the deepest questions were optional curiosities. We devote our days to paychecks, promotions, and the approval of peers. We spend years chasing degrees, often caring more for the diploma than for the knowledge it represents. We bend ourselves into exhausting shapes to impress people who will one day forget our names.

And then, when confronted with questions about existence—questions that reach to the root of everything—we wave them off as “abstract,” “unpractical,” or “philosophical” in the pejorative sense. We treat the ultimate as irrelevant, and the trivial as ultimate. That inversion of priorities should alarm us. What could be more “serious” than discovering whether reality itself has meaning? Centuries ago, Blaise Pascal captured this tension with frightening clarity. He stripped away our distractions and forced us to confront our situation without illusion. His words deserve to be read in full:

"I know not who sent me into the world, nor what the world is, nor what I myself am. I am terribly ignorant of everything. I know not what my body is, nor my

senses, nor my soul and that part of me which thinks what I say, which reflects upon itself as well as upon all external things, and has no more knowledge of itself than of them. I see the terrifying immensity of the universe which surrounds me, and find myself limited to one corner of this vast expanse, without knowing why I am set down here rather than elsewhere, nor why the brief period appointed for my life is assigned to me at this moment rather than another in all the eternity that has gone before and will come after me. On all sides I behold nothing but infinity, in which I am a mere atom, a mere passing shadow that returns no more. All I know is that I must soon die, but what I understand least of all is this very death which I cannot escape. As I know not whence I come, so I know not whither I go. I only know that on leaving this world I fall for ever into nothingness or into the hands of a wrathful God, without knowing to which of these two states I shall be everlastingly consigned. Such is my condition, full of weakness and uncertainty. From all this I conclude that I ought to spend every day of my life without seeking to know my fate. I might perhaps be able to find a solution to my doubts; but I cannot be bothered to do so, I will not take one step towards its discovery."[1]

Pascal can only regard such indifference as insane. Our condition ought to compel us to genuinely and seriously seek the ultimate truths of reality. Pascal refuses to let us hide. He names our ignorance, our fragility, our mortality. But above all, he names our indifference—the fact that we

[1] Les pensées, pg. 11

can live in such conditions and *not care enough to seek an answer*.

And yet, Pascal himself was proof of something extraordinary: the human mind. For all our smallness, we possess a gift beyond measure. We can imagine the infinite. We can reason about necessity and possibility. We can calculate the motions of planets and map intergalactic clusters millions of light-years away and unlock the codes of DNA within the cell. We can contemplate beauty, discover justice, and hunger for truth. Think of it: a creature as fragile as a leaf (relatively) has within it a faculty capable of grasping *eternal truths*. This is astonishing. It is as if reality itself were whispering to us that meaning is not only possible, but intended—that our thirst for truth is not an accident, but *a clue*.

This brings us to the urgency of the matter. If there is indeed a Plan—a *telos*, a design, a Mind—then it changes everything. Your life is not an accident. Your suffering is not meaningless. Your choices are not wasted. To ignore this possibility is not practical; it is reckless. And if there is no Plan, then this too must be faced. For then every ounce of dignity we can summon shall collapse in the face of the void. Either way, the question cannot be brushed aside. To refuse to answer is still to answer, and to answer by neglect is the gravest mistake of all.

You may say, "I don't need your inquiry or some flimsy notion of 'transcendence' to be happy. I'm perfectly content exactly as I am, exactly where I am. I make meaning for myself." But your meaning is not objective. It is a subjective bias you impose on yourself. Such an illusion will not bring us closer to the ultimate truth about reality. So go ahead, if you wish. Create meaning for yourself and never stop to ask about what lies ahead, or what may explain the very universe itself. But why? Why fabricate

such notions when the grand investigation is within your reach? Why settle for a fleeting mirage when you can strike gold? You are capable of far more than you can imagine, even if you do not believe it now. This may sound impossibly heavy. But sometimes the deepest truths come through in the simplest places—even in stories we grew up with. As the beloved fictional character Son Goku once said, "You already have all the power you need! Just *bring it out*!" Please, if you can hear me, do not let the opportunity pass you by. *Now* is the time.

And so, dear reader, this is not merely a philosophical exercise. It is about you. Your life. Your hopes. Your griefs. Your longings. You are not a spectator in this drama; you are a character within it. The question of whether the universe has ultimate meaning is not an external puzzle—it is the question of whether *you* have meaning. If there is a Universal Plan, then you are part of it. If there is purpose, then it enfolds your story, however ordinary or broken. And if there is a Mind behind reality, then you are already known by it. This book does not demand belief; it invites honesty. It asks you not to dismiss the greatest question of all because you are too busy, too distracted, or too afraid. It challenges you to step forward with courage and openness, to let your mind stretch as wide as the stars, and to let your heart be unsettled until it finds rest.

For if the universe is truly a story, then you—yes, you—are one of its protagonists. And nothing is more serious than discovering what kind of story it is, and what role you are meant to play.

Part I – Philosophy

I. Introduction

"Why are there beings rather than nothing? That is the question. Clearly it is no ordinary question. Why are there beings, why is there anything at all, rather than nothing?—obviously *this* is the first of all questions."
—Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*

Have you ever thought that, maybe, *just maybe*, the most important thing or truth in the world could be right in front of us? Or is reality too odd, too mysterious, to be understood in such a way? Ever since the dawn of time, people have been asking these kinds of questions. Why *is* the world *this way?* It certainly seems that it could have been different (just think about cartoons)! Analytic philosophers Alexander Pruss and Joshua Rasmussen contemplate: "Virtually everything we encounter in ordinary experience can, apparently, fail to exist. Cars, iPads, telephone poles, towers, flowers, mittens, kittens, bricks, sticks, planets, stars, dust: none of these things *have* to exist, it seems. We can easily imagine a universe without such things; and there was a time before anything of this sort existed. It seems the things with which we are familiar are *contingent*—i.e., possibly absent.[2] Is everything

[2] There is Williamson's proposal (Williamson 2001) that everything exists of necessity. But even Williamson allows for contingency in the world. He says it is contingent, for instance, whether a given physical thing is physical (pp. 12–13). And in general, where one might ordinarily say that objects pass in and out of existence, Williamson will say they pass in and out of a certain basic category of being (a category he calls 'concrete,' which is to be distinguished from the category of causally-capable things, which we call 'concrete'). Someone in Williamson's shoes could wonder, therefore, whether anything is necessarily on the side of this basic category which they are currently on.

contingent? Or, might there also be one or more things that exist of *necessity*? A necessary thing, as we are thinking of it, would be something that exists no matter what possible situation obtains. Its non-existence at any time would be impossible in the strongest sense. So, for example, a necessary thing cannot be assembled or disassembled. It cannot snap into being or snap out of being. It cannot *not* exist—no matter what. Is there anything like that?"[3] Obviously, to embark on such an investigation, we must know exactly what we're doing. But which framework ought we employ? Here we must begin. Let us consider *modal logic,* the logic of possibility and necessity. Modal logic opens a doorway into the deepest questions of reality, moving us beyond the black-and-white landscape of ordinary truth and falsity. Imagine ordinary logic as a map with a single territory—the actual world. Modal logic, in contrast, reveals an archipelago of islands: each "island" is a possible world, a complete way reality might have unfolded, each with its own unique features, events, and inhabitants. This is the imaginative leap at the heart of **possible world semantics**, pioneered by Saul Kripke. In this framework, a **possible world** is simply a way that it is metaphysically possible that the world can be or could have been. Possible worlds, then, are not mere fictions or science-fiction stories, but rigorous representations of all the ways reality could possibly be, given the broadest (metaphysical) sense of possibility.

Within this metaphysical landscape, we can ask: What is *possible*? What is *necessary*? What is *contingent*? Formally, a statement is **possible** if it is true in at least one possible world; it is **necessary** if it is true in every possible world. Take, for example, the statement "The sky is blue."

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[3] Alexander R. Pruss and Joshua L. Rasmussen, *Necessary Existence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 12-13.

In some possible worlds—perhaps worlds with different atmospheric conditions—the sky is green or purple. So, "The sky is blue" is contingent: it is possible, but not necessary. On the other hand, "2+2=4" is true in every possible world, so it is necessary.

It must be understood that by a "possible world" one does *not* mean a planet or even a universe, but rather a maximal description of reality, or a way reality might be. Perhaps the best way to think of a possible world is as a huge conjunction $p \,\&\, q \,\&\, r \,\&\, s \ldots$, whose individual conjuncts are the propositions $p, q, r, s, \ldots$ A possible world is a conjunction which comprises every proposition or its contradictory, so that it yields a maximal description of reality—nothing is left out of such a description. By negating different conjuncts in a maximal description, we arrive at different possible worlds:

W_1: $p \,\&\, q \,\&\, r \,\&\, s \ldots$

W_2: $p \,\&\, \neg q \,\&\, r \,\&\, \neg s \ldots$

W_3: $\neg p \,\&\, \neg q \,\&\, r \,\&\, s \ldots$

W_4: $p \,\&\, q \,\&\, \neg r \,\&\, s \ldots$

…

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…

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Only one of these descriptions will be composed of conjuncts all of which are true and so will be the way reality actually is, that is to say, the actual world. Since

we're talking about possible worlds, the various conjuncts which a possible world comprises must be capable of being true both individually and together. That is to say, each proposition must be metaphysically possible by itself, and the combination of propositions must be metaphysically possible together (that is, compossible).

Metaphysical possibility is one of the central types of possibility in modal philosophy. It's broader than **physical possibility** (which is limited by the actual laws of nature) but narrower than **strict logical possibility** (which requires only freedom from formal contradiction). The laws of nature themselves are not metaphysically necessary — they could have been otherwise — so metaphysical possibility allows worlds where physics differs from ours. However, metaphysical possibility is not as permissive as strict logical possibility, which can allow scenarios that violate the essential natures of things.

A proposition is usually considered at least *prima facie* metaphysically possible if:

1. It is **logically consistent** (contains no contradiction) and can be coherently conceived under sustained rational reflection.

2. It **respects the essential natures of things** — the kinds, properties, and identities that necessarily belong to them.

Thus, "the prime minister is a prime number," though strictly logically coherent, is not metaphysically possible because prime numbers are abstract objects and cannot be identical to concrete human beings. Likewise, "Socrates could have been a hippopotamus" is impossible on an essentialist view because Socrates is essentially human, and

being a hippopotamus would not be compatible with being *Socrates* in any possible world.

With that in place, we can talk about how to quantify metaphysical necessity and possibility. To keep track of these subtle distinctions, modal logic introduces special operators:

- "□" (box) for necessity ("It is necessary that..."), and
- "◇" (diamond) for possibility ("It is possible that...").

So, "□P" asserts that P is true in all possible worlds; "◇P" asserts that P is true in at least one possible world. Think of these operators as doors: "◇" opens a door to another world where P is true; "□" means you can open any door, and P will greet you every time.

Yet not all modal logics are created equal. There are many possible "rules of the game," each system with different assumptions about how worlds connect. The system called **S5** stands as the gold standard for **de dicto metaphysical modality**—the most general kind of possibility and necessity, unconstrained by the limits of knowledge, physical law, or perspective. It is, in effect, metaphysical possibility as applied to propositions (a dictum, hence *de dicto*) rather than the necessity of a thing's possessing a certain property per se (which would be *de re* necessity).

S5 is distinguished by a set of foundational axioms—rules that tell us how necessity and possibility behave. Here are the central ones:

- **K (Distribution):**
  $\Box(P \rightarrow Q) \rightarrow (\Box P \rightarrow \Box Q)$
  If it is necessary that P implies Q, then if P is necessary, so is Q.

- **T (Reflexivity):**
  $\Box P \rightarrow P$
  If something is necessary, then it is actually the case.

- **4 (Transitivity):**
  $\Box P \rightarrow \Box\Box P$
  If something is necessary, then it is necessarily necessary.

- **B (Symmetry):**
  $P \rightarrow \Box\Diamond P$
  If something is the case, then it is necessarily possible.

- **S5 Axiom (If P is possibly necessary, P is necessary):**
  $\Diamond\Box P \rightarrow \Box P$
  If it is possible that P is necessary, then P is, in fact, necessary.

K and T are pretty much axiomatic. 4 is also highly intuitive, if you think about it. If something is already necessary, then it's necessarily necessary. It can't be contingently (possibly not) necessary, or else that would mean it could fail to be necessary and thus fail to hold, which contradicts its necessity in the first place! As for

Brouwer, or B, this also seems quite clear. If something is already genuinely the case, then there's simply *no way* it could somehow be impossible! Could your existence somehow be impossible, even though you're already here? The last axiom, distinctive to S5, reveals the depth of S5's commitment to unrestricted metaphysical possibility. It says that if it's possible for something to be necessary, then it is already necessary—there are no "hidden pockets" of necessity that apply only from one vantage point but not from all.

How do these axioms build S5? Each axiom adds a layer of structure to the "roads" connecting possible worlds:

- K ensures logical coherence, so necessity distributes across logical implications.
- T says every world can "see" itself; if something is necessary, it must be true here and now.
- 4 ensures that necessity "sticks" across worlds; if something is necessary, it's necessarily necessary.
- B adds symmetry: if something is true, then from any world's perspective, its possibility is guaranteed.
- The S5 axiom, or 5, clinches the system by closing the gap between possible necessity and outright necessity, ensuring that necessity is fully global, not parochial to just some vantage points.

Notice that one *cannot* accept the first four of these axioms and *still* deny S5, because S5 is directly derived from them.[4] Many logicians and philosophers consider the

[4] Also, notice that one could simply use the weaker system S4, which states that ◇◇P → ◇P (that is, if P is possibly possible, then P is

axioms to be nearly axiomatic (no pun intended), and any attempt to refute them would have to also repair *significant collateral damage* to modal logic. Mathematically, these axioms force the "accessibility relation" between possible worlds to be an **equivalence relation**: every world is accessible from every other (reflexive, symmetric, and transitive). In plain terms: if you imagine stepping from one possible world to another, you can always step in any direction, as often as you want, and return to where you started. There are no "locked doors" between worlds.

Let's bring the analogy home: imagine all possible worlds as rooms in an infinite mansion. In some modal logics, certain doors between rooms are locked (you can get to some worlds, but not all, from a given room). In S5, every door between every pair of rooms is unlocked; you can walk freely from any room to any other, and every room has the same set of possibilities on offer. If, peradventure, you find a necessary thing in even a single room through the back door, you're guaranteed that it's everywhere (even if it's not always easy to see), including *here* (the actual world). This models the metaphysical sense that what's possible or necessary isn't dependent on where you "stand" in the mansion of worlds—possibility and necessity are truly universal.

But there's yet *another*, perhaps even more intuitive way to validly derive S5. One may simply use three axioms: K, T, and 5.

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possible), and add that to the Brouwer Axiom (B), which states (as already shown) that $P \rightarrow \Box\Diamond P$ (that is, if P is actual, then P is necessarily possible), to validly get S5. For S4, one could exemplify this in statements like "If it's possible that I *could* learn French, then I *could* learn French." B could be exemplified by a statement like, "If I can *actually* read Greek, then it *must be possible* that I can read Greek."

Axiom 5: What is possible (consistent with the truths of reason) cannot be impossible (inconsistent with the truths of reason).

In other words, $\Diamond P \rightarrow \Box\Diamond P$. If P is possible, then P is necessarily possible. "Consistent with the truths of reason" simply means "does not contradict anything that is necessary." That is, it neither is or entails any strict logical contradiction or violation of essential natures. In essence, it meets the criteria for being metaphysically possible. From K, T, and 5 alone (plus the regular logical rules of inference), modal logicians are able to validly derive the theorem $\Diamond\Box P \rightarrow \Box P$. That is exactly S5.

Why does S5 matter? For de dicto metaphysical modality—the study of what is possible or necessary in the broadest sense—S5 captures our deepest intuitions. We don't want possibility or necessity to be relative to particular vantage points, as in physical or epistemic modality. Instead, we want the rules of *reality itself*: necessity as that which could not be otherwise, and possibility as that which could have been otherwise, regardless of which world we start from. S5, supported by Kripke's possible world semantics, is robust, valid, and *widely accepted* among philosophers as the ideal logical system for this metaphysical investigation. Virtually all objections to S5 come from other types of modality (e.g., epistemic, deontic) or from de re (*not* de dicto) necessity.[5] Timothy Williamson, though being skeptical of S5 for epistemic modality, goes so far as to say that "Plausible closure conditions on the family of objective modalities are shown to entail that the logic of

[5] For a more thorough explication of S5's foundations, plus rigorous responses to several "de re" objections, see Pruss and Rasmussen's *Necessary Existence* (2018).

metaphysical necessity *is* S5."[6] In this authoritative statement, Williamson isn't addressing a niche application—he's arguing that if we understand metaphysical modality as the broadest kind of objective modality, then *S5 follows naturally* from reasonable principles about how these modalities must interact. By showing that "plausible closure conditions" (like T, 4, B, and its duals) inevitably lead to S5, he defends S5 not as an optional formal convenience, but as *a necessary outcome* of how we understand modal thinking.

Modal logic and S5 open the door to a rigorous and awe-inspiring landscape: not just a single reality, but a cosmos of all possible realities. They allow us to ask, with precision and clarity, what must be true, what could have been different, and what it means for something to be necessary or contingent—not just in one world, but across the total sweep of metaphysical possibility. The archipelago of possible worlds, navigated by the open doors of S5, reveals that metaphysical necessity is not the law of one room, but of the *entire* mansion of existence.

If you are still having trouble grasping all of this from the first time, that is quite normal! Take your time, look at everything, and try to make analogies in your mind. Master these before you move on to the next chapter.[7] You're going to need it!

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[6] Timothy Williamson, "Modal Science," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 46, no. 4–5 (2016): 453–492, emphasis added.

[7] For the interested reader, there is a full formal derivation of S5 in Part F of the Appendix.

II. The Answer

"Reality cannot be found except in One single source, because of the interconnection of all things with one another."
—G.W. Leibniz

We now arrive at one of the central pillars of our journey—an investigation that is as rigorous as it is inspiring. This chapter marks a turning point. Here, we will carefully unfold and examine a metaphysical argument that carries immense weight and consequence: the Modal Argument from Beginnings, or MAB for short. This argument, meticulously articulated by philosophers Alexander Pruss and Joshua Rasmussen, stands upon both the shoulders of twentieth-century advances in modal logic and the classical arguments of Natural Theology. It is not a casual speculation, but a carefully constructed proof—uniting deep philosophical insight with precise logical structure. After analyzing MAB, we will make a set of near-deductive inferences on the basis of its conclusion, called "Independent Bridges."

But an argument of this magnitude cannot go unchallenged. Major objections have been leveled against it, each raising a unique concern or attempting an escape. We will not gloss over these challenges. Instead, we shall confront them head-on, one by one, testing the argument's resilience, asking whether its structure bends or breaks under the weight of criticism. Only after this rigorous trial will we step back and survey the terrain—asking what escape routes, if any, truly remain for those who would resist the

argument's pull. Here is the Modal Argument from Beginnings (MAB):

1. Normally[8], for any positive state of affairs *S* that can begin to obtain, it's at least metaphysically possible for there to be something external to *S* that causes *S* to obtain.

2. It is at least possible for there to be a beginning of the positive state of affairs of its being the case that there exist contingent concrete things.

3. If (1) and (2) are true, then it is possible that there is a necessary concrete thing.

4. It's possible that there is a necessary concrete thing.

5. If it's possible that there is a necessary concrete thing, then there is a necessary concrete thing (S5 axiom).

6. Therefore, there is a necessary concrete thing (from 4 and 5).

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[8] Importantly, the "normally" operator is not meant to restrict (1) to *only* "beginnings that we encounter in daily experience." Rather, it is simply meant to *exclude* extremely niche, contrived pathological cases (e.g., a non-gerrymandered, maximally non-local circular causal chain) which are not relevant to the argument. It is quite dubious as to whether such contrived examples could even exist in reality. For that reason, readers who feel that the operator is tedious can simply ignore it, as the argument still works the same way. Pruss and Rasmussen, for their part, are confident enough in Premise (1)'s universal veridicality that they see no need of such an operator. In any case, the only relevant positive state of affairs which need be merely possibly causable is that which shall be expounded in Premise (2).

That's it![9] Now, let's take a close look at the very first premise, Premise 1.

Premise 1: "Normally, for any positive state of affairs *S* that can begin to obtain, it's at least metaphysically possible for there to be something external to *S* that causes *S* to obtain."

First, a few definitions. Let's look at how Pruss and Rasmussen (the creators of the argument) define "positive," "begin to obtain," and "external cause."

Pruss and Rasmussen begin by identifying that "A state of affairs is *positive* if and only if it specifies how things *are*, not how things *aren't*. So, for example, its being the case that there is a coffee cup on my desk is a positive state of affairs, whereas my coffee cup having no lid doesn't count as positive. The notion of "positive" need not be perfectly precise for our purposes and isn't based on axiological considerations. The advantage of focusing on positive states of affairs is that such states are familiar participants in causal explanations. (We leave it open whether negative states of affairs may also be causable.)"[10]

What about the other parts? Here, they carefully define the rest: "Begins: A state of affairs s begins to obtain if and only if (i) there is a time at which s obtains, (ii) there is a time or finite interval of time U, such that there is no time prior to U at which s obtains, and (iii) s would not obtain without time. In short, a state of affairs begins to obtain if

[9] To see MAB in formal symbols, see Part F of the Appendix.
[10] *Necessary Existence* (2018), Pruss and Rasmussen, 146.

and only if its obtaining is restricted to a finite interval of time in the past direction.

Consider next the term "external cause." We intend to use the term "cause" in a minimal sense to pick out anything that acts as an antecedent condition (or entity) at least partially causally responsible for some event.[11] We leave specific theories of causation wide open. An external cause is supposed to be a cause that isn't included in its effect. To be more precise, let us say that a given cause c of s counts as external to s if and only if the following counterfactual fails to hold: if s were to fail to obtain, then c would fail to exist. So, for example, if a bird makes a nest x, the bird is an external cause of the state of affairs of x existing."[12]

Those are the definitions! So, let's think carefully about Premise 1. Now, it's extremely important to understand that Premise 1 is not saying that every positive state of affairs (which begins) *must have*, or even *actually does have,* an external cause. It could be *uncaused or completely brute*. We're talking about mere possibility here.

Any support proffered for a strong causal principle applies at least equally, and arguably *more so*, to this weak causal

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[11] Here, "antecedent" can be either temporally or simply causally prior, depending on the relevant context. If one desires maximum coverage, then we can say that the term "cause" refers to any antecedent *or simultaneous* condition (or entity) at least partially responsible for some event. This might appear superfluous to some readers, but the definition seems to come in handy in certain unique situations, such as the beginning of the universe, where time itself literally begins. Such a beginning *cannot* have a temporally antecedent cause (since there was no time before it), but it *can* have a cause that is coincident or simultaneous with its beginning. A more mundane illustration, inspired by Immanuel Kant, is that of a heavy metal ball resting on a pillow cushion. The ball causes the effect of a pressure deformation or indentation on the cushion, and the cause is simultaneous with the effect.

[12] Ibid, 147-148

principle. For positive evidence, consider these four points. I'll end with an analogy.

1) *Inductive generalization* - In both science and everyday life, we constantly apprehend positive states of affairs that begin as *actually* having an external cause. The virtually unbroken track record across all disciplines is quite impressive. But, crucially, the weak causal principle doesn't even require actuality, but only mere *possibility*. Inductive generalization is thus much safer with this weak causal principle. To give an analogy, imagine you're riding through a neighborhood, and you notice that the roofs of all the houses are blue. You're about to turn into another corner of the neighborhood and see new roofs. Now, it might be risky to inductively generalize that those houses you're about to see actually have blue roofs (analogously to a strong causal principle), but consider the alternative. You could inductively generalize that it's at least possible that the houses you're about to see have blue roofs. If those roofs turn out to be special and actually red, then your possibility principle still stays intact. The *mere possibility* remains.

2) *A priori intuition* - For any arbitrary positive beginning, it seems both intuitively plausible and readily conceivable for there to possibly be an external cause. Conceivability provides defeasible evidence of metaphysical possibility. It bolsters the overall case, but it is not incontrovertible. It doesn't have to be. In any case, it's a good sign. Surely, we wouldn't want our premise to be *inconceivable*!

3) *Conceptual Coherence* - Upon analysis, there seems to be no conceptual incoherence or absurdity in positing at least the mere possibility of an external cause (in *some* possible world) for a given positive state of affairs that begins. Even if a positive state of affairs that begins actually has no cause at all, still it seems perfectly coherent

that it *could* have an external cause in at least one possible world.

4) *Compatibility* - Unlike its predecessors, this weak causal principle is fully compatible with the metaphysical possibility (and even actuality) of brute facts, uncaused contingent beginnings, ungrounded infinite causal regresses, internal contingent explanations, and even circular causal chains. This is important, because some people balk at certain events in quantum mechanics, which they say seem uncaused. That's fine here. To defeat (1), the detractor would have to show that a quantum event (that begins) is not just uncaused, but absolutely *uncausable* in every single possible world. To claim a sweeping universal metaphysical impossibility for a quantum event surely requires justification. That's not the same as saying it's just actually uncaused; one must clearly prove any notion of an external cause for its positive beginning is absolutely metaphysically impossible. Second, many philosophers and physicists don't believe that, say, virtual particles are causeless anomalies that emerge from nothing; rather, they emerge from the quantum vacuum, which is a sea of fluctuating energy governed by physical laws within the universe (certainly not nothing)! Even if such experts are blatantly mistaken, and virtual particles actually have no cause at all, still it is metaphysically coherent that they could have at least some cause in some possible world. Just look at the explanation I just gave! *Surely* that's not universally metaphysically impossible and incoherent? Or for another pathway, we can coherently envision a metaphysically possible world where perhaps a special machine or field (or perhaps a different physical law) triggers the emergence of the particle. The mere *possibilities* seem nearly endless.

Finally, hopefully an analogy will be illuminating. Imagine that, one day, you come home and suddenly find a toy robot on your desk *that wasn't there before*. Surely, it's at least *possible* that it could have *some* external cause, in *some* possible world? Who knows; maybe it's just a brute anomaly that popped into being uncaused from literally nothing (though many would find that absurd)! Or perhaps someone put it there, or the wind blew it into there, somehow. In any case, an external cause is at the very least *metaphysically possible* in *some possible world*.

In order to deny this premise, one must clearly prove that there is some positive state of affairs (that begins to obtain, and is directly relevant to the state of affairs described in Premise (2)) for which it is not only unactual or improbable, but *absolutely metaphysically impossible* for there to be *any* external cause in *any* possible world. That's a strong modal claim that would require justification. Absent such, it seems to me that Premise 1 is at least more plausibly true than false.

Premise 2: "It is at least possible for there to be a beginning of the positive state of affairs of its being the case that there exist contingent concrete things."

Two reasons may be offered in support of this premise:

1) First, conceptually, anything contingent can, *by definition*, fail to exist. Thus, there is simply no metaphysical contradiction in envisioning at least one possible world where contingent things all begin together.

2) Second, some of the most *widely respected* cosmological models that involve a universal beginning provide intuitive

rational support for (2). Since the universe is, by definition, all matter, space, and time, its beginning would seem to constitute at least a plausible *possible* starting point for contingent concrete things.[13] Those models need not be *actually true or even probable*, but so long as they're just *metaphysically possible*, that's sufficient. I don't think that anyone will say that the Standard Cosmological Model, for example, which many cosmologists believe is *really true*, is not only mistaken but is *absolutely metaphysically impossible*. The burden of proof in showing that *all* cosmological models (despite their philosophical coherence and empirical corroboration) that involve a universal beginning are absolutely metaphysically impossible is extremely immense.

Evaluating Premises (1) and (2)

In Chapter 1 we set out two central criteria for a proposition's being metaphysically possible. For a proposition to count as metaphysically possible, it must (1) exhibit strict logical coherence (i.e., be free of contradiction), and (2) not contradict the essential natures or necessary properties of the entities it concerns. We can now apply these criteria directly to Premises (1) and (2) of the Modal Argument from Beginnings (MAB). If the criteria are sound—and most philosophers would agree they are—then, regardless of whether we have independent positive evidence for the premises, both can be shown to be metaphysically possible. With S5 in play, that is enough to

[13] This move is further strengthened when one reflects on it. Anything outside of the spatiotemporal commencement, and thus timeless, spaceless, and immaterial, would pretty much just be a necessary abstract object, or perhaps the necessary being we're about to discuss.

render the argument sound. The question, then, is whether the premises clear this bar.

Premise (1) states:

"Normally, for any positive state of affairs S that can begin to obtain, it is at least metaphysically possible for there to be something external to S that causes S to obtain."

This contains no strict logical contradiction. It is not like "a square circle" or "a married bachelor." So Criterion (1) is satisfied.

What about Criterion (2)? Does the essential nature of a "positive state of affairs that begins to obtain" preclude the possibility of an external cause? Clearly not. There is nothing in the concept of a "beginning" that rules out causability. In fact, it seems the opposite: we regularly observe positive beginnings that are caused. A candle flame being lit, a seed sprouting into a plant, a room becoming illuminated, a melody played on a piano, or the birth of a child are all examples of positive states of affairs that begin to obtain and do so precisely because of external causes.

If the very nature of being a positive beginning excluded external causation, then such instances would be metaphysically impossible. Yet they are obviously real.[14] Thus, both criteria are met, and Premise (1) counts as at least metaphysically possible.

[14] Throughout we assume at least **T** ($\Box P \rightarrow P$), standard for metaphysical modality. By duality ($\Diamond \equiv \neg\Box\neg$), **T** yields the principle $\mathbf{P \rightarrow \Diamond P}$ ("If P is actual, then P is possible"). Hence the observed instances cited above license the modal claim that such states of affairs are metaphysically possible.

Premise (2) states:

"It is at least possible for there to be a beginning of the positive state of affairs of its being the case that there exist contingent concrete things."

Again, no strict logical contradiction appears here. This is not like asserting a "four-sided triangle" or "I am both taller and shorter than myself." Criterion (1) is satisfied.

What about Criterion (2)? Does the essential nature of a "contingent concrete thing" exclude its having a possible beginning? Again, no. By definition, a contingent entity is one that can fail to exist. Therefore, it is perfectly coherent to envision at least one possible world in which a contingent concrete thing (or an entire collection of them) has a beginning.

Even if one assumed—against much of contemporary cosmology—that matter itself were metaphysically necessary and could not come into or go out of being, Premise (2) would still stand. For even on that view, contingent *arrangements* of matter—stars, planets, galaxies, organisms, or artifacts—could have beginnings. These are plainly contingent and could fail to exist.

And here, too, our everyday experience reinforces the point. A tree sprouting from a seed, a smartphone coming off an assembly line, a child being born, a house being built, or a star forming in a nebula—all are contingent concrete things with a beginning. Whether we construe these as new objects coming into being or as matter being arranged in novel ways, their contingency and their beginnings are beyond dispute. Surely these observed instances are not metaphysically impossible. Thus, both criteria are again satisfied.

We can now see that both Premises (1) and (2) cleanly meet the bar for metaphysical possibility. That is precisely what MAB requires: not that the premises be demonstrably *actual*, but that they be demonstrably *possible*. Moreover, their possibility is vividly illustrated by directly observed instances, even if those are "smaller-scale" cases compared to the global premises of the argument. The fact that they occur in our experience *at all* shows that their *essential natures* do *not* exclude causability or beginnings.

Importantly, the mere fact of being the *first* contingent beginning introduces no new barrier. A first contingent beginning is no more metaphysically "uncausable" than a first contingent book is uncausable. Nothing in the essence of contingency changes merely because the case happens to possibly be "first."

The only way to resist this conclusion would be to assume *a priori* either (a) that no necessary thing could ever be a cause, or (b) that metaphysically necessary beings are impossible altogether. But both moves are question-begging: they assume precisely what they need to prove, namely that no necessary concrete thing exists. Unless someone can offer a non-circular reason to adopt such sweeping impossibility claims—or show that the two criteria themselves are defective—the analysis holds. On the criteria established, the premises are metaphysically possible, and with S5, MAB is confirmed as sound.

Premise 3: "If (1) and (2) are true, then it is possible that there is a necessary concrete thing."

Here, "concrete" simply means anything capable of causation. Notice that this premise isn't saying that the

explanation *must* be a necessary being. There's room for brute fact, internal contingent explanation, or even a circular causal chain. It's just that, if you already accept both premises, a necessary concrete thing is a coherent possibility. Given S5, the rest of the argument follows logically. There is a necessary concrete thing.

But perhaps from Premise (3) one would like a clearer, more discursive formulation of why the possibility becomes actual, rather than just citing S5. Here is such a formulation:

1. It is possible that a necessary concrete thing exists (from Premise 3).
2. If it is possible that a necessary concrete thing exists, then a necessary concrete thing exists in some possible world.
3. If a necessary concrete thing exists in some possible world, then it exists in every possible world. (In virtue of its necessity, which follows by definition.)
4. If a necessary concrete thing exists in every possible world, then it exists in the actual world.
5. If a necessary concrete thing exists in the actual world, then a necessary concrete thing exists.
6. Therefore, a necessary concrete thing exists.

As in Plantinga's Ontological Argument, (2)-(5) are relatively uncontroversial, and (1) has been independently established by MAB. Thus, we've deduced that there is something that can't fail to exist and that is capable of causation (i.e., concrete).

Independent Bridge I

One of the essential attributes that can be established in Stage II is the agency of the necessary entity, i.e., its volitional capacity to act freely. To establish this characteristic, Rasmussen (2009) argues that the causal connection between contingent substances and the necessary entity (let's call it "N") suggests the presence of a non-deterministic volitional act that would establish the personality of the necessary being. To establish this attribute, Rasmussen makes use of the following principle of causality:

(C1) For any set of contingent intrinsic properties or relations C, it is at least metaphysically possible that C be causally explained.[15]

This principle (similar to those sometimes proposed in Stage I) states that for every contingent property or contingent relation present in a concrete object/substance, it is possible that this exemplification can be causally explained.

The motivation behind C1 is highly intuitive and justified, and to illustrate it, we will use the following scenario: suppose there are two spherical objects, one red and the other blue. Both objects exist contingently and exemplify their colors contingently, meaning that neither their existence nor their colors are necessary, as they could have not existed or exemplified a different color. Naturally, the following question arises: why do these objects exist, and

[15] Note the use of the modal operator of possibility (◊) when it is asserted that " C be causally explained," making C1 exceptionally modest. Also, C1 presents a slight modification that simplifies the one presented by Rasmussen. From MAB, we know that the property of being contingent can begin to be exemplified, and thus it may very well seem plausible, as in C1, that contingent intrinsic properties or relations at least permit a causal explanation in one possible world.

why do they have the colors they have? An explanation in causal terms for the contingent existence, properties, and relations of both objects should be metaphysically possible. This is what C1 claims.

The second principle that will be used states that:

(D1) For every finite attribute A, where A consists of possessing a certain property D to the degree μ, and any concrete object x that has A, there is a degree such that it is possible for x to have D to the degree μ – e or μ + e.

What D1 states is that for any finite attribute possessed by a concrete object/substance, that attribute will be contingent since it could have been possessed to a greater or lesser degree. To illustrate this, we could imagine a certain object with a measurable finite power. Suppose this object possesses 100 units of power x. Therefore, this degree of power is contingent because it could have been possessed to a degree of 100 + e or 100 – e (for example, 99.999 or 100.001). Therefore, the power possessed by this object will be *contingent* as it could have been exemplified to a *different* degree.

Based on these principles, Rasmussen presents the following strategy to demonstrate that N is a personal agent: From Stage I of the cosmological argument, we know that N is a necessary entity that explains the existence of all contingent concrete things/objects that exist (let's call this set of things "L"). But if N does not possess the ability to act freely (i.e., if it were not a personal agent), then the mere existence of N would be a sufficient condition for the existence of L. Since N is a necessary entity, the existence of L would also be necessary. However, this is contradictory because L is, by definition, contingent. Therefore, N cannot be an impersonal entity.

However, one could propose an impersonal non-deterministic alternative, meaning that even though N is not a personal agent, the explanation it provides for the existence of L is indeterministic. This would imply that N has a fixed degree of probability, denoted as H, of causing the existence of L. However, due to principle (D1), this probabilistic property is contingent because it could have been possessed to a different degree. But according to (C1), this probabilistic property can be causally explained. This leads to a circular problem since N would need to possess a probabilistic property to causally explain the contingent properties and relations, including the probabilistic properties that N itself possesses in the first place.[16]

This problem arises from the assumption that N is an impersonal entity that explains the existence of L in a non-deterministic way. Therefore, N cannot be an impersonal entity with probabilistic properties to causally explain L.

Because of this, the only remaining option is that N is a personal agent. Since its causal activity is not impersonal, it follows that N is a being with volition and free will. Thus, the explanation for the existence of L will be in terms of a personal agent. Below is the formal argument:

1. N is a necessary entity that explains the existence of a specific L in some world *w* (Stage I).

2. N is a (i) personal or (ii) impersonal entity.

3. Suppose that (ii) N is an impersonal entity (reductio).

[16] More specifically, for any set M of contingent properties that includes the contingent properties of N, N could not explain M because it would be circular. Rasmussen refers to these sets of contingent properties and relations as "gridscapes."

4. If (ii), then the explanation for the existence of L can be (a) impersonal deterministic or (b) impersonal non-deterministic.

5. Suppose (a) the explanation is impersonal deterministic.

6. Therefore, the mere existence of N is a sufficient condition for the existence of L in w.

7. Therefore, the existence of L is metaphysically necessary since N is a necessary being.

8. But the existence of L is contingent (by definition of "set L").

9. But (8) contradicts (7).

10. Therefore, the explanation is (b) impersonal non-deterministic.

11. If the explanation is impersonal non-deterministic, then N explains the existence of L under a fixed probability degree.

12. But if N has the property of causing the existence of L under a fixed probability degree H, it is possible that N could have that property to the degree H+e or H–e (principle (D1)).

13. Therefore, that property of N is contingent.

14. Therefore, that property can be causally explained.

15. But N is the cause of all contingent things and properties in *w* (Stage I and principle (C1)).

16. But then the probabilistic property of N is ultimately explained by the causal activity of N.

17. But (16) is a circular explanation since the probabilistic property of N is explained by the causal activity of N, which requires a probabilistic property in the first place.

18. Therefore, N cannot have a fixed probabilistic property of causing L.

19. But (18) contradicts (11).

20. Therefore, the explanation is neither (a) impersonal deterministic nor (b) impersonal non-deterministic.

21. But (20) contradicts (4).

22. Therefore, the supposition (3) is false.

23. Therefore, N is not an impersonal entity.

24. Therefore, (i) N is a personal entity.

Independent Bridge II

The following argument developed by Pruss (2009) to establish agency involves analyzing the type of explanation that the necessary being provides for the existence of contingent reality, specifically, what kind of causal activity allowed the existence of the contingent. When we examine the possible types of explanations, we encounter three distinct categories: scientific explanations in terms of contingent laws, conditions, and causes; personal explanations in terms of agents and their volition; and conceptual explanations.

Now, what type of explanation does the necessary being provide for the existence of contingent reality? Pruss argues that a conceptual explanation is not viable because the existence of contingent substances in reality cannot be

conceptually explained by something other than the substances themselves. This is because they are self-sufficient, and even if we allow that they can be conceptually explained by their constituent parts, those parts themselves are substantial, leading to the same problem. Therefore, this option is ruled out. With respect to scientific explanations, the entities involved in such explanations are laws and contingent conditions. However, this is not possible in this scenario because, by definition, the necessary being does not exist contingently. Therefore, given this triple disjunction, the only remaining option is an explanation in personal terms. This implies that the necessary being explains the existence of contingent reality through its volitional activity, making it an intentional agent. Here is the formal argument:

1. N has necessary existence (Stage I).

2. The explanation for L is (a) scientific, (b) conceptual, or (c) personal.

3. Suppose (a) the explanation for L is scientific.

4. Scientific explanations occur in terms of contingent causes.

5. Therefore, the explanation for L is a contingent cause or causes.

6. But (5) contradicts (1) since N has necessary existence.

7. Therefore, (b) the explanation for L is conceptual.

8. However, the substances in L cannot be conceptually explained by something other than the substances themselves.

9. Therefore, (c) the explanation for L is personal.

10. Therefore, N is a personal being.

These are just two independent bridges to personhood derived from MAB! There are three other, independent bridges! To access some of the other independent bridges, we'll need first to determine whether or not spacetime itself is plausibly contingent. If spacetime is contingent, then the necessary being we've deduced *can't* be spatiotemporal (at least causally prior to spacetime) in its essence. Let me give two reasons why spacetime is plausibly contingent.[17]

1) First, the myriad of diversely coherent spacetime models suggest that it's metaphysically possible that spacetime could have been (or can be) genuinely different, thus implying contingency. In modern cosmology, one has such models as oscillating models, quantum loop models, inflationary multiverse models, cyclic-ekpyrotic models, string theory models, and so on. In philosophy of time and space, spacetime could be relative or absolute, and time could be A-theoretical, B-theoretical, or correspond to Growing Block Theory. None of these models need be true or even probable, but so long as *some of them* are simply metaphysically possible, that's enough.

2) Second, an essential property of a necessary being is that it be eternal, that is, without beginning or end. If it's metaphysically possible that spacetime have a beginning (that is, there is a possible world where spacetime began), then it cannot be necessary. But here we come face-to-face

[17] Notice that even if one bites the bullet and claims that spacetime itself (and thus the universe) is metaphysically necessary, still MAB's core argument and even first two independent bridges to personhood still go through successfully. After all, the first contingent beginning could simply take place *within* the necessary universe! To downplay even this, one would have to ultimately posit that contingency itself is metaphysically impossible in any form, which is surely a non-starter.

once more with some of the most widely respected cosmological models involving a true spatiotemporal commencement. If just one of those models is merely metaphysically possible, this point goes through. Once again, I don't really think anyone will claim that the Standard Cosmological Model, for example, which most cosmologists believe is really true, is not only blatantly mistaken but is absolutely metaphysically impossible in *all* possible worlds.

Thus, it seems to me that spacetime itself can be plausibly taken to be contingent. It therefore follows that the necessary concrete thing cannot be spatiotemporal. It must therefore be spaceless, timeless, and thus immaterial. (At least causally prior to the universe)

Independent Bridge III

Another argument to establish personal agency has been proposed by Craig (2008), and it consists of analyzing the type of entity that possesses or fulfills the characteristics associated with the necessary entity.

Particularly, Stage I establishes the existence of a necessary entity N with certain causal powers, from which the existence of contingent reality is grounded. However, given its nature, this entity must be essentially immaterial because material composition implies a certain level of contingency in terms of spatial location, composition, and quantity of matter, contrary to its necessary essence. But given these properties (necessity and immateriality), the types of entities that fit this description are reduced to only two: abstract objects or minds.

The first type, abstract objects, are immaterial and necessary entities that exist outside the concrete realm,

understood as the causal network among objects that have the capacity to affect each other in some of their properties or relations. On the other hand, mental entities are those that possess intentionality and causal capacity.

Now, since N is the cause or ultimate foundation of contingent reality, it follows that it must possess some kind of causal power or explanatory capacity concerning contingent objects; otherwise, it could not be the ultimate causal explanation of them, contrary to the conclusion of Stage I. But if this is the case, N cannot be an abstract entity, as by definition abstract objects are outside the concrete realm and, therefore, causally inert. The number 7, for example, can't cause any effects.[18] Due to this, the type of entity that corresponds to the nature of N is mental entities. Therefore, N is an intentional agent with mental capacities. Here is the argument in formal notation:

1. N is a necessary entity that explains the existence of contingent reality at some world *w* (Stage I).

2. If (1), then N is immaterial (since materiality implies contingency).

3. If (2), then N is (a) an abstract entity or (b) a mind.

4. Suppose N is (a) an abstract entity.

5. But abstract objects are causally inert.

[18] The idea that there may exist causally efficacious, special platonic forms is a highly niche minority view that is widely rejected, and in any case would require positive justification. An abstract object, *by definition,* is causally inert. But even if we allow for this possibility, it's ultimately rendered null by the other independent bridges, which rule out an impersonal timeless necessity.

6. But (5) contradicts (1), as in that case, N could not be the ultimate cause of contingency.

7. Therefore, N is (b) a mind.

Independent Bridge IV

Excellent! This next argument comes from Craig (2008) once more and has been elaborated upon by other philosophers. We thus have a timeless necessary concrete thing. But now we must ask, how can a timeless cause be capable of producing a temporal effect that begins to obtain? Stated differently, how does a timeless necessary cause produce a temporal effect (that begins) in some possible world *w*? How can a timeless cause produce a temporal effect?

If the timeless cause were merely an impersonal force or set of conditions that is *actualized*, then the effect would be *eternal.* If the timeless cause were merely an impersonal force or set of conditions that is *not actualized*, then the effect would *never exist*. It can't go from non-actualized to actualized (or vice-versa) in essence because it is timeless and therefore *changeless*. So how can we solve the dilemma?

It seems that the only way out of this dilemma is for the timeless cause to be a personal agent that has some sort of free choice - that is, to freely choose to engender an effect in time. As some philosophers say, a man sitting timelessly from eternity could *freely and spontaneously choose* to stand up! Free choice, as we've seen, strongly indicates personhood in at least some minimal sense. Here is the argument in formal notation:

1. N is a timeless necessary entity that produces a temporal effect which begins at some world *w*.

2. Per the Law of Excluded Middle (LEM), N is either impersonal or personal.

3. If N is impersonal and timeless (and thus changeless), it is either timelessly (i) actualized or (ii) not actualized to produce its effect.

4. Suppose N is impersonal and timelessly actualized (reductio).

5. But then the effect would eternally proceed from N.

6. But (5) contradicts (1), since the effect is temporal and begins, and is not eternal.

7. So N is not impersonal and timelessly actualized.

8. Suppose N is impersonal and timelessly not actualized (reductio).

9. But then the effect would never proceed from N, and thus never exist.

10. But (9) contradicts (1), since the effect is temporal and begins, and is not non-existent.

11. So N is not impersonal and timelessly unactualized.

12. So N is not impersonal, whether timelessly actualized or unactualized (from (7) and (11)).

13. Therefore, N is personal (from (2) and (12)).

Independent Bridge V

Another way to probe the personhood of a necessary concrete being (N) is to evaluate what, apparently, it seems to have produced. For if there exists a necessary concrete thing, the most fundamental thing which is capable of causation, then it seems plausible that it may be the cause of our universe, perhaps at the Big Bang. We may ask: once we know such a being exists, what can be said about its nature in light of the universe we actually inhabit? One of the most remarkable features of our cosmos is its delicate fine-tuning—the extraordinary precision in the initial conditions and constants of physics that allow for order, complexity, and ultimately conscious life. This phenomenon is not incidental but central, for it provides a powerful inductive reason to infer that N is not merely necessary but also intelligent.

The fact of fine-tuning is well-established in contemporary cosmology and physics. Consider a few examples. The cosmological constant, which governs the rate of cosmic expansion, is set to a value so precise that if it differed by one part in 10^120, the universe would either have collapsed back upon itself or expanded too rapidly for stars and galaxies ever to form. The ratio of the electromagnetic force to gravity is similarly precarious: if gravity were marginally stronger, stars would burn too quickly and collapse; if weaker, they would never ignite nuclear fusion at all. The strong nuclear force also reveals this knife's-edge balance: an increase of just 2% would prevent hydrogen from existing, while a decrease of 5% would preclude the formation of elements beyond helium. Finally, the low-entropy initial state of the universe, which made possible the unfolding of ordered processes, represents an improbability on the order of 1 in 10^(10^123), as calculated by Penrose (1989, p. 343). These examples are

not isolated curiosities; they reflect a consistent pattern—our universe appears astonishingly constrained in life-permitting directions.

Once N is acknowledged, the natural question arises: why does the universe it grounds display such precision rather than chaos? Here the inductive argument takes shape:

1. N exists as a necessary concrete being (Stage I).
2. The actual universe exhibits extraordinary fine-tuning in its laws, constants, and initial conditions.
3. If N were impersonal (a brute force, mechanical principle, or abstract necessity), the emergence of fine-tuning would be inexplicable, for chaotic, sterile, or disordered configurations would be at least equally expected.
4. Whenever we encounter highly specific and purposive complexity—that is, order both improbable and functional—and a viable causal candidate possibly capable of intellect is delineated, intelligence is the best explanation.
5. Therefore, the best explanation for the fine-tuning of the cosmos is that N is intelligent and intentionally structured the universe.

The conclusion arises from the sharp contrast between what would be expected under impersonal necessity and what is actually observed. Pure metaphysical necessity entails nothing about order or intelligibility. A world of random chaos, sterile voids, or unstable laws would be no less possible. Indeed, one might argue that disorder is ontologically more probable, since there are vastly more ways for things to fall into chaos than into the razor-thin

corridors of life-permitting order. The fact that our universe lies within such a narrow, highly specified range suggests that the necessary being behind it did not merely generate reality blindly but acted with intention.

Objections merit consideration. Some argue that fine-tuning is simply the result of chance. But the sheer improbability strains credulity: to suppose that constants balanced to one part in 10^120 (not to mention Penrose's calculation) emerged by accident is to accept a probability so negligible as to be practically indistinguishable from zero. Others appeal to a multiverse, suggesting that if there are infinitely many universes, it is not surprising that one happens to be life-permitting. Yet this move does not dissolve the explanatory demand. Even a multiverse would plausibly be grounded in N. Why, then, would N generate a structured ensemble of universes governed by meta-laws that produce order at all, rather than anarchic chaos? The fine-tuning problem simply shifts to a higher level. Still others invoke the anthropic principle: we should not be surprised to observe a life-permitting universe, since we could not exist in any other. But this is a tautological observation, not an explanation. It tells us why we cannot observe a sterile universe but not why such an extraordinarily improbable universe exists in the first place. To use John Leslie's famous analogy, if one survives a firing squad of one hundred trained marksmen, the fact that one is alive to register surprise does not diminish the need for explanation (Leslie 1989, pp. 13–14). The rational inference is intentionality, not mere luck.

The force of the fine-tuning bridge lies in its explanatory asymmetry. If N were impersonal, the structure of reality should have been indifferent to order and chaos alike, offering no special reason for the emergence of intelligibility or life. Yet our universe is not merely ordered

but ordered in a way precisely compatible with the flourishing of conscious minds capable of grasping the truth of the world around them. That our cosmos is not only structured but intelligible suggests that its source is not brute necessity but a mind—a necessary intelligence whose intentional design accounts for the razor-thin margins of possibility.

Thus, the fine-tuning of the universe is not a neutral fact but a profoundly probative one. It reinforces the earlier bridges by adding a crucial dimension: personhood entails not only volition, immateriality, and timeless causality, but also the exercise of intelligence. The Necessary Concrete Being is not a blind metaphysical substrate but a Necessary Mind, the rational and purposive source of order, complexity, and life itself.

We therefore have five independent bridges to personhood! Accept *just one*, and the personhood inference goes through.

It's important to note that by "personhood" one does not necessarily mean personal interaction with the world or emotional connection, but simply at least some minimal form of consciousness or self-awareness. In effect, a transcendent Mind.

We've gone through the full positive case! Now, it is time to address some objections! We'll rigorously tackle 10 in total.

Objections

Objection 1: "There can be no external cause for the positive state of affairs of the universe's beginning. For that external cause would have to be some prior state of affairs in which the universe does not exist. But that would have to be nothingness, and nothing can't cause anything. So, the positive state of affairs involving the universe's beginning is necessarily uncausable and defeats Premise 1."

Reply: The problem is that this line of attack is clearly fallacious. For it simply assumes that the universe is all there is and all there can be, so that if there were no universe, there would have to be nothing. In other words, the objection assumes that *naturalism* is true! Not only that, but it assumes that it is true as a matter of metaphysical *necessity*, *without* justification. The objection thus fails and is fallaciously question-begging.

Objection 2: "As Bede Rundle has said, although nothing exists necessarily, nevertheless it is necessary that something or other exist. That puts the entire project in doubt."

Reply: Rundle's view, while clever, collapses for two reasons. First, it entails a contradiction. Imagine a possible world with just one contingent thing. That thing is contingent, and so can, by definition, fail to exist. But at the same time, since something or other must exist, and that one thing is all that's there, it cannot fail to exist. It both can and cannot fail to exist. If you deny the former, then it's really necessary, not contingent. If you deny the latter, then Rundle's hypothesis fails. Either way, Rundle's hypothesis appears to collapse. Second, Alexander Pruss has pointed out that Rundle's view has a highly implausible consequence. It's possible, on Rundle's view, that a mere conjunction of claims about the non-existence of certain

things entails, say, that a unicorn exists! On Rundle's view, the conjunction, "there are no people, there are no planets, there are no mountains, there are no stars, (including everything that is not a unicorn)" entails that a unicorn exists, which seems absurd. Because if something or other must exist, and none of the other things listed exists, then all that is left is a unicorn. Moreover, on Rundle's view, there is nothing that would account for why contingent beings simply happen to exist in every possible world. Since there is no necessary being (on his view) there is nothing that can cause contingent beings to exist everywhere and thus no reason why they have to exist. But a world devoid of contingent beings is strictly logically possible. Given the infinity of broadly logically possible worlds, the probability that in all of them contingent beings just happen to exist inexplicably is infinitesimal. Thus, the probability of Rundle's hypothesis is effectively zero.

Objection 3: "The argument is plainly question-begging. The only reason I could believe that an externally caused contingent beginning is even possible is if I already maintain that a necessary being exists."

Reply: The charge of question-begging appears, at first glance, reasonable and is to be expected. But this charge fails for 3 reasons. First, if a neutrally plausible set of premises validly implies a particular conclusion (even if it mirrors the conclusion of the argument), that doesn't necessarily mean it's question-begging. Second, the premises contain within themselves room for alternative possibilities, such as a brute, uncaused contingent beginning, which many naturalists happily propose elsewhere. Surely the skeptic won't say that brute facts or brute contingent things aren't even possible, because then Leibniz's PSR will come charging at him with full force! Third, we've given independent conceptual and empirical

reasons for the relevant premises, and none of those require any prior belief or assumption regarding a necessary being. Thus, the charge of question-begging fails.

Objection 4: "The argument is dialectically ineffective, because I could easily construct a parody of it using the opposite possibilities. Wouldn't that lead to the conclusion, via S5, that there is no necessary being?"

Reply: First, consider that the conclusion of MAB is actually fully compatible with the parody principle. Possibly, a beginning of contingency has no cause. After all, there is no requirement that a necessary concrete thing *must* cause contingent beginnings. There can be worlds in which a necessary concrete thing coexists with a first contingent beginning that is uncaused. Thus, a parody argument, *even if* supplanted with positive justification (which seems dubious), simply lacks the deductive structure to defeat the affirmative conclusion. Simply envisioning a possible world where contingent beings come into being uncaused, or imagining a world where contingent beings exist eternally, gives us no grounds at all for thinking it genuinely possible that there *is* no necessary concrete thing. At most, it just shows it's not absolutely necessary that it be *causally connected* to contingency. But its very *existence* is independently safeguarded. To defeat MAB, one would need a stronger parody principle, such as,

1. Possibly, there is no necessary being.
2. Therefore, there is no necessary being (S5).

But this structure faces two problems. First, (1), without some robust justification, is dialectically hollow. One could easily use the opposite premise to validly get, via S5, the opposite conclusion. So raw intuitions cancel out. It certainly can’t be the case that a particular necessary being both exists and does not exist, so it all comes down to

which one we have more warrant for. Second, to say that "possibly, there is no necessary being," is to say, in effect, that "there is a possible world where the being that exists in all possible worlds does not exist." That is a flat contradiction. To substantiate such a claim, one would have to clearly show that the specific necessary being in question is fundamentally incoherent or absolutely metaphysically impossible. This has *not* been done.

Objection 5: "As Hume argued, we can conceive of any being's not existing, and so the entire concept of a necessary being is simply incoherent."

Reply: This old objection fails for two reasons. First, mere conceivability does not incontrovertibly imply metaphysical possibility. I could easily conceive of a world devoid of any and all abstract objects like numbers, sets, propositions, properties, and so forth, but does that suddenly mean they can all now fail to exist? Many will find that highly implausible. Similarly, it's extremely easy for me to imagine a raging tiger suddenly coming into being, uncaused, out of literally nothing, and most metaphysicians would say that this is metaphysically impossible.

Second, Hume's objection lacks nuance that contemporary modal logic adds. Propositions need not be *strictly logically* necessary in order to be *metaphysically* necessary; for example, Gold has the atomic number 79, water is H_2O, and whatever has a shape has a size. Conversely, propositions need not be strictly logically impossible in order to be metaphysically impossible; for example, the prime minister is a prime number, this table could have been made of ice, and Socrates could have been a hippopotamus. Saul Kripke's work further expounds upon

such nuances that Hume's argument (understandably) was unable to grasp. Thus, with regards to a necessary being, the fact that the proposition "a necessary being doesn't exist" is not a strict *logical* contradiction in no way shows that its existence is not *metaphysically* necessary.

Objection 6: "The weak causal principle actually isn't so weak if Kripke's doctrine of origin essentialism[19] is true. It implies the stronger causal principle, which destroys the argument's dialectical effectiveness and brings back the host of old objections to haunt it."

Reply: First, it should be noted that origin essentialism is far from universally accepted. Some philosophers have reasonable concerns, and if their objections go through, this one may fail, too. Second, Premise 1 can be slightly tweaked to accommodate origin essentialism, and the rest of the argument goes through successfully. We can restate Premise 1 as: "Normally, for any positive state of affairs S that can begin to obtain, it's at least metaphysically possible for there to be something external (to S or *a duplicate of S*) that causes it to obtain." A "duplicate" here is simply a qualitative twin; more precisely, S1 is a duplicate of S2 if and only if they are exactly similar with respect to their intrinsic, non-haecceistic[20] properties. They differ at most only with respect to their haecceistic properties.[21]

As Pruss and Rasmussen say, “For example, this term ‘cat’ is (nearly) a duplicate of this ‘cat.’ … [moreover, the enhanced version of Premise 1] has an important advantage

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[19] Origin essentialism is the view that an object’s particular causal history or origin is essential to its identity as an object.
[20] **Haecceity** is the property or quality that makes something uniquely itself and not anything else; it is the “thisness” that individuates an object.
[21] For a more thorough treatment of "duplicates" and illustrations, see Pruss and Rasmussen's book *Necessary Existence*, 167-169.

over (1). The advantage concerns conceivability: for any conceivable event E, it seems we can conceive of something just like E having a cause. Take a particular volcanic eruption, for instance. When I try to conceive of a cause of the eruption, I bring to mind certain properties of the eruption. In so doing, I am able to at least conceive of a cause of the same type of eruption. Maybe a particular eruption could lack a cause, and so by Kripke's origin thesis, be uncausable. Even still, it may seem perfectly possible for there to be a cause of some other eruption of the same type. So, (16) could be plausible even to those who may doubt premise (1). The rest of the argument is nearly the same. We must add only that a necessary thing is the only thing that could externally cause a duplicate of the state of affairs of there being contingent things. This premise is no less plausible than premise (3): for if there can't be a contingent thing that is causally external to there being contingent things (premise (3)), then there surely can't be a contingent thing that is causally external to any duplicate of there being contingent things. After all, no contingent thing can exist prior to (without) there being any contingent things at all."[22]

Objection 7: "We have no experience of fundamental things beginning to exist, and everything we see that is caused is caused by prior materials. Moreover, perhaps our experience of causation, which was formed entirely *within* the universe, cannot apply to the *whole* universe itself. Thus, we have no grounds to think that Premise 2 is even possible, or that it could be caused."

Reply: I believe that the metaphysical possibility of widely respected cosmological models, including models in which space, matter, and time themselves all begin to exist

[22] Ibid, 167-169

(though we have no experience of such a commencement) is sufficient to overturn the concern about Premise (2). But even if one denies the mere *possibility* of all these models outright (already a radical move), still the conceptual plausibility of (2) remains, and, as Footnote 17 notes, it is compatible with the stipulation of a metaphysically necessary universe. For the criticism about causation of a universal beginning, notice that the argument does not necessarily require universal quantification. Although cosmological models were used as support, still one can envision a possible world with maybe *just one or two* contingent things that begin and are externally caused, not an entire universe of contingent concreta per se. But even then, no positive justification has been given (other than appeal to mystery) for why such a universal beginning should be a special exception. Without some independent motivation, such a move threatens to collapse into what Alexander Pruss calls the *Taxicab Fallacy.* Moreover, notice that the argument is actually compatible with fundamental things being beginningless or uncausable; what would be needed for the objection to stick is a demonstration that positive states of affairs involving contingent things are somehow fundamental, which, given that they can by definition *fail to exist*, seems highly dubious.

Objection 8: "Maybe the first beginning of contingency is too remarkable or special to be causable at all. Normal beginnings may well be causable, but this particular one is a good candidate for exception. We should doubt this possibility."

Reply: First, for this objection to stick, one must make a claim tantamount to saying that for the positive state of affairs (that begins) of there being contingent concreta, it is absolutely metaphysically impossible for it to have any

external cause in any possible world. That surely requires justification.

Second, there is simply no metaphysical contradiction in contingent concreta being externally caused. Consider the criteria offered in the previous chapter. There is no strict logical contradiction at all in the proposition “the first contingent beginning could have an external cause in some possible world.” Neither is there any apparent violation of essential natures, since contingent beings can fail to exist by definition and positive states of affairs involving them are amply observed as being caused (e.g., a baby is born, a tree begins to grow, a star forms, etc.). Even if one assumes that both matter and the laws of nature are metaphysically necessary (a radical assumption that few seriously entertain), still one may coherently envision a possible world with a first contingent arrangement being possibly caused. MAB is formulated in terms of *positive states of affairs* that can begin to obtain, not necessarily in terms of new objects suddenly popping into existence. The only way one could justify persistent skepticism in this area is by *already* saying that no non-contingent thing can ever cause anything, which is just question-begging.

Third, the principle of modal uniformity guarantees that this metaphysical possibility, whether for 1, 10, 1000, or even "all" contingent concrete things, remains plausibly constant (though there is no magic in simply using the word "all.”)

Objection 9: "On your bridges to personhood, the necessary being's volition would be just as necessary as itself, so that we're stuck in the same conundrum, and no advance is made."

Reply: This objection makes a subtle category mistake. First, it's true that the volitional capacity is a necessary

characteristic of this being; it is necessarily an agent. But with regards to volitional capacity, there is no "*existing differently*" or not. It's all-or-nothing here. Either the capacity is present, or it isn't. And if present, it permits the making of free decisions independently of any prior determining conditions. The being's essence properly remains necessary (it cannot fail to exist) though it is capable of freely engendering contingent acts. This is just like how, whether I choose to have coffee or tea in the morning, I won't suddenly *transform* into a different person! The essence of who and what I am remains *invariant*, regardless of which contingent act I freely choose to engender. The objection thus conflates volitional capacity with contingent volitional acts.

Objection 10: "The idea of timeless volition is untenable. When we choose something, we have to learn, choose, and weigh options within time. There is no coherent way of how this could even be described, and so your fourth independent path to personhood fails."

Reply: While timeless volition is certainly alien to us, it is not incoherent. In fact, a timeless act of will can be coherently conceptualized as a single, indivisible "now" in which the Mind simultaneously (i) contemplates the space of possible worlds, (ii) evaluates them against its own reasons or values, and (iii) employs its own agent-causal power to make one of those possibilities concrete. Because the intellect's grasp is instantaneous and non-discursive, no temporal deliberation is required. The possibilities, the preference, and the causal decision all co-inhere in one simple mental state. This act would be logically prior to the universe - its existence would depend on that volition - and yet it would be temporally simultaneous with the very first instant of the cosmos. Freedom is preserved because nothing outside of or earlier than the agent influences its

decision, and contingency is preserved because other fully-envisioned possibilities remain merely possible. Thus, genuine rationality, freedom, and asymmetric dependence can all be maintained without any "before-after" within the chooser.[23]

Thus, as we've seen, most objections are either outright fallacious or implicitly make unfounded assumptions without justification.

Graham Oppy, perhaps the most prominent atheist philosopher of religion writing today, has spent much of his career attempting to neutralize theistic arguments, especially cosmological and modal arguments for the existence of God. In response to Alexander Pruss and Joshua Rasmussen's Modal Argument from Beginnings (MAB) and its offshoots, Oppy proposes what looks like a neat inversion. His reasoning is deceptively simple:

1. It is possible for there to be a beginning of the positive state of affairs of there being *none but* contingently existing causal beings.

2. If it is possible for there to be a beginning of the positive state of affairs of there being none but contingently existent causal beings, then it is possible that there is no necessarily existent causal being.

[23] The being would thus plausibly be timeless without the effect and in time with the temporal effect. For a more thorough treatment, see William Lane Craig, "Divine Timelessness and Personhood," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 34, no. 2 (1993): 111–132; see especially pp. 115–118.

3. (Therefore) There is no necessarily existent causal being.[24]

At first glance, this looks elegant—almost a mirror-image of theistic modal reasoning. But once we look carefully at what Oppy's first premise actually means, *the whole case falls apart.*

First and foremost, what does it mean to say there is "a beginning in which only contingent beings exist"? There are two possible interpretations.

On the **first interpretation**, Oppy is saying merely that at the first moment of some world, all the things that *begin to exist* are contingent beings. But this is entirely compatible with theism. The theist is happy to grant that the first arrivals on the scene are contingent concreta; what they deny is that these contingent beings exhaust what exists. The theist insists that, alongside them, there is also a necessary being who does not begin. Understood this way, Oppy's premise is harmless. It cannot do the work he needs, because it does not entail that possibly no necessary being exists.

On the **second interpretation**, Oppy's premise must mean that there is a possible world in which *everything that exists is contingent*—that there is no necessary being at all. But this is simply to assert, in different words, the very conclusion Oppy wants to prove: that possibly no necessary being exists. This is question-begging of the most obvious sort. The conclusion is not derived; it is *assumed* from the outset.

This reveals the dilemma at the heart of Oppy's counter-argument. If his first premise is read weakly, it is consistent

[24] Oppy, Graham (2019). Alexander R. Pruss and Joshua L. Rasmussen. Necessary Existence. Journal of Analytic Theology 7 (1):765-771.

with theism and leads nowhere. If it is read strongly, it sneaks the denial of theism into the very starting point. Either way, the argument is dialectically inert.

It is important to see that this is not a symmetrical move against theists. The Modal Argument from Beginnings does not assume its conclusion. Pruss and Rasmussen begin with modest, intuitive premises: that contingent beings can have beginnings, and that beginnings can have external causes. From there, they reason carefully to the existence of a necessary being. At no point do they smuggle their conclusion into their premises. By contrast, Oppy's "anti-MAB" only works if his very first step already excludes the possibility of a necessary being. That is not parity—it is circularity. One can genuinely accept Oppy's Premise (1) only if *already* persuaded that a possible world could exist containing *nothing but* contingent causal beings, so that there is no necessary concrete reality—no being existing across all possible worlds. Yet no independent reason is offered for why anyone should accept so weighty a claim *in the first place.*

The problem becomes even clearer if we switch the domain. Imagine someone trying to prove that numbers, as necessarily existent abstract objects, do not exist. They argue:

1. Possibly, there is a world in which only concrete things exist.

2. If that is possible, then possibly there are no numbers.

3. Therefore, numbers do not exist.

No philosopher would treat this as a serious argument against Platonism. Why? Because premise (1) already assumes the very point at issue—that there can be a world

without numbers. But that is precisely what the Platonist denies, and precisely what the argument is supposed to demonstrate. Unless one can show that numbers as abstracta are incoherent or impossible, the "argument" is nothing more than a restatement of one's conclusion as a premise.

Oppy's reasoning works the same way. To say "possibly, there is a beginning with only contingent beings" in the strong sense is just to say "possibly, there is no necessary being." But that is *exactly* what is under dispute. Unless he can show that a necessary being is impossible—contradictory in the way a square circle is—his argument is dialectically toothless. Oppy might as well have bidden us to imagine a world with five planets and *to simply assume* (without argument) that there is no necessary being.

So, what looks like a neat inversion of theistic modal arguments turns out to be a mirage. Either Oppy's premise is weak and consistent with theism, or it is strong and transparently circular. Either way, it has no bite. The argument, dressed up as a clever parody, is revealed to be nothing more than a rhetorical shortcut. It does not mirror the Modal Argument from Beginnings; it simply declares from the outset what it is supposed to prove.

This is why Oppy's "anti-MAB" does not unsettle theism in the least. It is philosophy by stipulation, not by demonstration. If one wants to deny the existence of a necessary being, one must do the hard work of independently motivating that such a being is ultimately impossible or incoherent. Simply imagining a world without one is no argument at all. If this is really the best counterargument a critic can offer, then what does that tell us about MAB?

Assessment

Now, it's vital to recognize what the Modal Argument from Beginnings (MAB, this argument) both does and doesn't prove. It appears to rigorously demonstrate that at least one necessary concrete thing exists which is conscious—that is, a transcendent Mind. The singularity (in contrast to a plurality) of this being is proven by two things. First, its very nature logically precludes any differentiator. It is timeless, so there can't be "one before and one after." It is spaceless, so there can't be "one here and one over there." It is immaterial, so there can't be "one made of gold and the other made of bronze." It all comes down to One. Second, Occam's Razor prevents us from gratuitously multiplying ontological entities beyond necessity. MAB coherently arrives at the conclusion of one Necessary Mind, nothing more.

It's important to understand that this modal argument tells us nothing about the *moral character or intentions* of the Necessary Mind. In one sense this is a *huge advantage*—the modal proof goes through in full and *completely sidesteps* any and all arguments from the Problem of Evil, divine hiddenness, or issues related to religious diversity. It's a robust theistic argument *immune* to any of these by nature. But, at the same time, many might find such an abrupt end unsatisfactory, especially when the waters are this deep. They might say, "Look, I know He's there. But *who is He*, really?"

In the end, I suppose that not everything can be (or should be) settled philosophically. One might want to leave the rest between an inquirer and God. Many would be content to stop there and let the inquirer continue his investigation elsewhere (e.g., history).

That being said, let's take one last look at MAB. When all is said and done, there are only *four exhaustive escape routes* left for any skeptic, each of which bears considerable cost. They are:

1. Abandon standard Kripke Possible World Semantics.

2. Deny S5 for de dicto metaphysical necessity (and thus reject either K, T, 4, and B or K, T, and 5).

3. *Clearly prove* that there is some positive state of affairs (that begins to obtain) for which it is not only unactual or improbable, but *absolutely metaphysically impossible* for there to be *any* external cause in *any* possible world at all, and ensure that the counterexample is directly fatal to the argument's case as formulated, not merely an irrelevant contrived invention. (That is, ensure that the allegedly uncausable counterexample somehow proves that the positive beginning mentioned in Premise (2) cannot have any external cause in any metaphysically possible world.)

4. *Clearly prove* that it is absolutely metaphysically impossible for there to be *any* beginning of the positive state of affairs of its being the case that there exist contingent concrete things, in *any* world.

Now, notice that each of these escape routes is costly. Taking Route #1 is to virtually jettison the engine of contemporary modal logic. There are alternatives, such as Branching Actualism, but these are relatively minority views and are far from being widely accepted in this context.[25] Taking Route #2 is to abandon axioms that most

[25] Although Schmid and Malpass, in their paper "Branching Actualism and Cosmological Arguments," claim that BA is relatively popular, there seems to be little evidence for the assertion. **Branching Actualism** is a minority view among philosophers working on metaphysical modality. The majority of analytic philosophers still prefer **Kripkean Possible World Semantics** (especially the "abstract worlds" or "ersatz" versions)

find quite natural and almost axiomatic, and to repair the collateral damage done to modal logic afterward. Routes #3 and #4 require making sweeping claims of metaphysical impossibility that are extremely difficult to cogently justify. Moreover, notice that taking any one of these exhaustive escape routes offers literally no gain. You gain no new insight or benefit besides merely rejecting MAB.

By contrast, one Necessary Mind (the upshot of MAB) is able to seamlessly give a unified explanation for:

1. Why anything exists at all.
2. Why the universe began (if it did).
3. Why the universe is fine-tuned.
4. The applicability of mathematics to the external world.
5. Moral normativity.
6. The origin and nature of consciousness.
7. Personal experience.

These are not trivial results, and this list isn't even exhaustive. One could very well accept MAB in virtue of its incredible explanatory benefits and power. In fact, it might seem to many that accepting one Necessary Mind is

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for handling metaphysical modality, especially de dicto modality. There are **no surveys** showing that a significant portion of philosophers accept Branching Actualism as superior to Kripkean possible worlds. For example, the **2019 PhilPapers Survey** (which asked over 800 professional philosophers about major positions) did not list Branching Actualism as a major option for metaphysical modality, but possible world semantics is assumed as the default in most philosophy departments and journals. In any case, the defender of MAB may rationally reject Branching Actualism altogether in favor of the standard Kripkean Possible World Semantics. KPWS is formally valid, flexible, widely accepted, and doesn't require the seemingly arbitrary restriction that *all* possible worlds must, *incontrovertibly,* share a past history up to a certain arbitrary point with this one. For more information, see Appendices G and E.

a lighter commitment than these implausible escape routes that offer no benefit at all. For a *lighter* commitment, you can have *all of this.* I don't think anyone will say, "Sure, a Necessary Mind exists, but it has absolutely nothing to do with the suspiciously well-calibrated fine-tuning of the universe! It's just standing there in the corner, looking suspicious, when in reality it has nothing to do with it at all!" The result, if MAB is broadly correct, is very clear.

It's important to understand that, to rationally affirm MAB and at least one bridge to personhood, one need not have absolute certainty or be *compelled.* In fact, philosophically speaking, one has absolute certainty about almost nothing. Assent becomes rational if the premises of a valid argument (like MAB) are each more plausibly true than their contradictories. In a deductive argument, if each premise is more plausibly true than false, then the conclusion is guaranteed to be more plausibly true than false, and we should believe it. After all, as Pascal adduced, we have nothing to lose and infinity to gain.

Still, if we have really deduced a Necessary, Conscious Mind, we cannot help but seriously wonder, "Who *is* He?" That question, I'm afraid, is one that pure metaphysics is unable to answer. But that does not mean it is unanswerable. In fact, for many of you, this might just be the most exciting part of your investigation. Don't give up. *Keep searching*. Because, on the other side, you're bound to find something more beautiful, more powerful, grander, than you could have ever imagined. *I promise.*

Appendix

Part A – The Nature of Necessity and Metaphysical Possibility

On Possible Worlds and Modal Semantics

In recent decades, modal logic has often been illuminated by what is called *possible-world semantics*. The basic idea is that a possible world represents a way things might have been — a complete specification of reality in all its details. One may think of such a world as an all-encompassing state of affairs, or as a maximal collection of propositions, each either affirmed or denied, with nothing omitted. To qualify as a possible world, the set of included states of affairs must be internally coherent; that is, they must all be mutually compossible.

A further condition sometimes discussed is that a possible world must be *actualizable*, in the sense of being genuinely realizable. How exactly this is to be understood is disputed. For some, it simply means logical consistency — the absence of contradiction. For others, that criterion is too weak. Plantinga illustrates this point by noting that "The Prime Minister is a prime number" is free of contradiction, yet not something that could genuinely obtain. He prefers to speak of "broad logical possibility," a category that he illustrates but does not rigorously define. This has led many philosophers to distinguish between strict logical possibility, broad logical (or metaphysical) possibility, and actualizability.

In this framework, a proposition is necessary if it holds in every possible world, and possible if it holds in at least one. A necessary falsehood is false in all possible worlds; a

contingent proposition is true in some and false in others. Care must also be taken with the scope of necessity. *De dicto* necessity is the necessity of a statement itself being true in every possible world. *De re* necessity, by contrast, concerns an entity's having a property essentially — a feature it possesses in all possible worlds in which that entity exists.

On God as a Necessary Being

From antiquity, especially since Aristotle, many theologians in the West have described God as a necessarily existing reality (*ens necessarium*). Yet, following the criticisms of Hume and Kant, philosophers became skeptical of this idea, often dismissing the very notion of a "necessary being" as a category mistake: necessity, they argued, applies to propositions, not to entities. To reply that the theist's claim is that "God exists" is necessarily true seemed no help, since existential statements were assumed to be uniformly contingent. Moreover, the negation "God does not exist" is not itself contradictory, so theism, critics argued, cannot be logically necessary. Others went further, contending that the whole necessary/contingent distinction is a matter of linguistic convention.

Over the past few decades, however, much of this skepticism has been challenged. Possible-world semantics has provided the theist with a clearer framework: to say God is a necessary being is simply to say that "God exists" is true in every possible world, with "God" functioning as a rigid designator for the same entity in each world. Many philosophers have no difficulty affirming the necessary existence of abstract objects like numbers or propositions. To deny that God could have the same modal status, while allowing it for such entities, risks inconsistency.

The relevant modality here is not merely strict logical consistency, but broad or metaphysical possibility. Deciding whether something is metaphysically possible often requires reliance on conceivability and modal intuition. For instance, although not logically contradictory, statements such as “Socrates could have been a hippopotamus” are commonly judged metaphysically impossible. Conversely, some metaphysically necessary truths are neither tautologies nor analytic definitions, e.g., “Gold has atomic number 79” or “Whatever begins to exist has a cause.”

Thus, the mere fact that “God does not exist” is not a contradiction does not imply that theism is not metaphysically necessary. Similarly, “Nothing exists” is not contradictory, yet that hardly makes it a genuine metaphysical possibility. If independent reasons suggest a necessary being exists, it is question-begging to dismiss the claim just because its denial is logically consistent.

As for the view that necessity is nothing more than a matter of language, this collapses once one distinguishes between sentences (linguistic items) and propositions (the truths expressed). The necessity of a proposition such as “Either God exists or He does not” is not determined by how we happen to use words, but by the nature of reality itself.

The upshot is that the concept of God as a necessarily existent being, understood in this broader metaphysical sense, remains coherent and defensible within Christian theism.

Part B – The Type of Necessity Used, and Temporal Compatibility

Everything in the Modal Argument from Beginnings (MAB) can be stated purely in **de dicto** terms. In each step we assert that *it is necessary that a certain proposition holds*, never that *this very individual is necessary across all worlds* (which would be a de re claim). Concretely:

Core modal move (S5)

$\Diamond \Box P \rightarrow \Box P$

If it's possible that necessarily P, then necessarily P.

Existence of a necessary concrete thing

$\Box \exists x\, N(x)$

Necessarily, something is concrete & non-contingent (i.e., necessary).

Because the necessity operator □ always governs an *entire statement* rather than attaching to a specific entity's essence, we never have to decide whether one and the same individual shows up in multiple possible worlds. That neatly avoids the familiar de re puzzles about trans-world identity, origin essentialism, haecceity, and so forth.

Although de dicto necessity in our utilization of S5 suffices for the core MAB argument, multiple bridges to personhood employ de re necessity. However, this is (relatively) uncontroversial, because we're not employing de re necessity *with* S5. S5 is *only* used de dicto once in

MAB (particularly Premise 5), thus sidestepping most objections.

Moreover, Both the core Modal Argument from Beginnings (MAB) and multiple bridges to personhood can be rendered in a way that is perfectly neutral between an **A-theoretic** (tensed / dynamic) and a **B-theoretic** (tenseless / block-universe) understanding of time. Pruss and Rasmussen do this by defining "*begins to exist*" (or "*a state of affairs begins to obtain*") in purely structural terms that make no reference to a privileged present or to any metaphysical "flow" of time:

*Let S be a positive state of affairs. S **begins** just in case the set of times at which S obtains is non-empty and has a lower bound, but S fails to obtain at all times earlier than that bound.*

- For an **A-theorist**, that lower-bound time is literally the first *present* at which S occurs;
- For a **B-theorist**, it is simply the earliest member in the tenseless ordering of events.

Because the definition is cast in terms of an ordering relation on times (rather than on the passage of time itself), it can be plugged into either ontology without change.

So long as one accepts that *causation* can be asymmetric even if the temporal relation is tenseless (B-theory) or dynamic (A-theory), all bridges go through exactly as stated. Nowhere do they necessarily depend on an objective "present" or a real "becoming."

Thus, adopting either the A- or the B-theory alters none of the premises, modal machinery, or inferential steps of MAB. The argument's force rests on modal and causal

principles that are common coin in both temporal metaphysics.

Part C – On Immanuel Kant's Noumenal Epistemology and its Shortcomings

Immanuel Kant's "noumenal epistemology"—the view that we can know nothing about "things-in-themselves" (noumena) and that all our knowledge is limited to "phenomena" as shaped by the structures of our own mind—has been a subject of intense philosophical debate since the eighteenth century. Yet when it comes to modern cosmological arguments (such as those for the existence of God), Kant's radical separation between noumenal and phenomenal reality does little to diminish their force. This is because Kant's epistemology faces serious philosophical and scientific objections, and is rarely taken at face value by contemporary philosophers or scientists.

1. The Self-Defeating Character of Kant's Noumenal Limit

Kant famously asserts that "we cannot know anything about things in themselves" but only about appearances. But this position is, as many philosophers have pointed out, self-defeating. If we truly have no access to the noumenal realm, how can Kant know (or even assert) that it exists at all, or that our concepts—like logic, causality, or even existence—fail to apply there? As Paul Guyer notes, "Kant cannot consistently maintain that we know nothing at all about things in themselves, while at the same time making all sorts of claims about them."[26]This basic contradiction undercuts Kant's distinction at its root. For the purposes of cosmological arguments, then, Kant's restriction simply does not "stick"—for it lacks both coherence and argumentative power. If the existence or nature of the noumenal realm is beyond all possible knowledge, it is not a serious barrier to inference about reality, causality, or explanation as demanded by cosmological reasoning.

[26] Paul Guyer, *Kant* (Routledge, 2006), 107–110.

2. Empirical Science and Theoretical Entities: A Counterexample

A second, perhaps even more devastating critique comes from the history and practice of contemporary science. Kant posited a sharp limit on human knowledge, claiming that we could never know what lies beyond the veil of our own sensory forms and conceptual structures. Yet the extraordinary success of modern science in postulating, reasoning about, and confirming the existence of entities far removed from direct perception—quarks, black holes, neutrinos, strings, and even the inflationary early universe—shows that reality is not limited by the boundaries of empirical sensation. Scientific realism, the view that science tells us (at least approximately) how the world actually is, is now widely accepted. As philosopher of science Stathis Psillos writes, "the spectacular empirical success of science would be a miracle unless the scientific theories are at least approximately true and the theoretical entities referred to actually exist."[27]In other words, Kant's epistemology fails to account for the actual workings and achievements of science: we do, in fact, learn about the unobservable structures and causes underlying reality, and cosmological arguments operate precisely by employing such reasoning.

3. Kant's Noumenalism Largely Rejected

Finally, it is important to note that Kant's original "noumenal epistemology" is a minority position today. Contemporary epistemology, metaphysics, and philosophy of science rarely accept his radical limitations. While some post-Kantians have adapted his insights, the notion that we cannot know anything about reality-in-itself is, as philosopher Rae Langton notes, "mostly rejected by contemporary philosophy as unnecessarily skeptical and

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[27] Stathis Psillos, *Scientific Realism: How Science Tracks Truth* (Routledge, 1999), 78.

incoherent."[28] Instead, most philosophers accept that our knowledge—while fallible and corrigible—can reach beyond appearances, and the extraordinary reach of scientific inquiry confirms that we are not as locked into our own perceptual and cognitive structures as Kant believed. This further disarms any Kantian objection to the force or legitimacy of modern cosmological arguments, which rest on the very reasoning and empirical practices that have most thoroughly left Kant's epistemic strictures behind.

In summary, Kant's noumenal epistemology is both self-undermining and empirically disconfirmed, and is rarely accepted by philosophers today in anything like its original form. Consequently, it provides little, if any, genuine obstacle to contemporary metaphysical or cosmological argumentation.

[28] Rae Langton, *Kantian Humility: Our Ignorance of Things in Themselves* (Oxford University Press, 1998), 7; see also the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "Kant's Metaphysics," §8.2.

Part D – On David Hume's Causal Skepticism and Why it Fails to Affect MAB at All

David Hume's well-known skepticism about causation—that we have no rational or necessary basis for inferring a causal connection between events—has echoed for centuries in philosophy. Hume argued that we never observe causation directly, only "constant conjunction" of events, and thus causation might be nothing more than a habit of thought rather than a real feature of the world. However, there are several decisive reasons to reject this radical skepticism, especially when considering arguments like Pruss and Rasmussen's Modal Argument from Beginnings (MAB), which operates on far more modest grounds than Hume imagined.

1. The MAB and Minimal Causation

First, Pruss and Rasmussen's MAB does not depend on causation being a *necessary* or *always* actual connection. It requires only that causation, defined in the broadest and most minimalist terms—as "any antecedent condition or entity responsible for some event"—is metaphysically possible. In other words, the argument only asks whether, in some possible worlds, there can be causes for beginnings or events. It remains neutral on competing theories of causation (regularity, counterfactual, productive, etc.), intentionally leaving the notion of "cause" open so long as it denotes some antecedent condition or entity responsible for something else. To deny even the *possibility* of such a connection is to adopt an extraordinarily radical view: it would entail that, in every possible world, nothing can ever be responsible for any event—a position that borders on incoherence. To say that all causation is metaphysically impossible is not just radical; it is virtually unintelligible.

2. Scientific and Medical Practice Disconfirm Humean Skepticism

Moreover, that sort of extreme skepticism is empirically disconfirmed by the success of science and, perhaps most dramatically, by the progress of modern medicine. The *entire project* of medicine is to identify, understand, and intervene in the *causes* of disease. The success stories of epidemiology, vaccines, surgery, and genetics are incomprehensible unless causation is at least a coherent and operative concept. The reality of causes and effects is not a mere projection of human psychology, but is vindicated every time a cure is discovered or an epidemic is controlled. As philosopher Nancy Cartwright observes, "The success of science would be a miracle if the concept of cause were fundamentally incoherent or without grip on the world."[29] It is no accident that causal inference is at the heart of scientific methodology, experimental design, and explanation.

3. The Untenability of Global Causal Skepticism

Finally, to say that *all* causation, even in the minimal sense, is metaphysically impossible, is a position that is not only unsupported but verges on self-refutation. If there are no possible causal connections, then not only is all of science and ordinary life inexplicable, but the very notion of explanation itself collapses. Our language, our thinking, and even Hume's own argument presuppose that antecedent conditions can lead to consequences—even if only in argument or logic! Hume himself explicitly affirmed the objective veracity of a *stronger* causal principle than what is present in MAB. In fact, one can hardly doubt that he would have gladly accepted at least the prima facie plausibility of the weak causal principle that MAB employs. To take the special guise of Humean skepticism to jettison all talk of causation is to misrepresent

[29] Nancy Cartwright, *Nature's Capacities and Their Measurement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 1–2.

both reality and Hume's own position. In 1754, he wrote to John Stewart:

"But allow me to tell you, that I never asserted so *absurd* a proposition as that *anything* might arise without a cause. I only maintained, that our certainty of the falsehood of that proposition proceeds neither from intuition nor demonstration; but from another source."[30]

[30] David Hume, *Letter to John Stewart*, 22 February 1754, in *The Letters of David Hume*, ed. J. Y. T. Greig, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932), 187.

Part E – More on Kripkean Possible World Semantics

Kripke-Style Possible World Semantics (KPWS) remains the gold standard for illustrating and analyzing modal syntax, owing to its precision, conceptual clarity, and deep entrenchment in both philosophical and technical traditions. Introduced in the late 1950s and 1960s by Saul Kripke, KPWS revolutionized modal logic by providing a mathematically elegant framework for representing modalities—possibility and necessity—in terms of accessibility relations between possible worlds, each of which can be formally characterized as a model of the language in question. In this approach, the truth of modal statements like "It is possible that P" ($\Diamond P$) or "It is necessary that P" ($\Box P$) is cashed out as the existence or universality of P across certain worlds related by an accessibility relation, allowing a uniform treatment of a vast family of modal logics, from the basic system K to S4, S5, and beyond. This framework directly enables completeness and soundness proofs and gives a perspicuous model theory for modal languages that simply cannot be matched in clarity or technical power by its alternatives[31].

What truly sets KPWS apart is its *conceptual and practical flexibility*. Philosophers and logicians have, for decades, debated the metaphysical status of "possible worlds." However, KPWS does not require heavy metaphysical commitments: as Kripke himself emphasized, "possible worlds" can be regarded as purely formal, mathematical constructs used for semantic interpretation, and are not to be confused with "alternate universes" in any literal sense[32]. Indeed, the world semantics can be relativized to any set of models or scenarios—epistemic, temporal, deontic, or even fictional—allowing modal logic to be

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[31] See "Kripke Semantics for Modal Logic," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

[32] Saul Kripke, *Semantical Considerations on Modal Logic*, *Acta Philosophica Fennica* 16 (1963): 83–94; see also "Modal Logic," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, §2.1.

applied across diverse fields such as computer science (for system verification and model checking), linguistics (for intensional semantics), and metaphysics (for analyzing necessity and possibility in natural language)[33]. As Patrick Blackburn, Maarten de Rijke, and Yde Venema observe in their influential treatise, "the possible worlds approach provides a highly general and unifying framework for understanding modalities of all kinds, including time, knowledge, belief, obligation, and more"[34]. This generality and technical maturity have led to its overwhelming adoption in logic textbooks, technical literature, and advanced philosophical research, making it the lingua franca of modern modal analysis[35].

Alternative approaches, such as Branching Actualism, have not matched the power, clarity, or technical tractability of KPWS. Branching Actualism attempts to "ontologically economize" by refusing to countenance possible worlds, instead analyzing modal claims as potentially infinite conjunctions or disjunctions of actualized possibilities[36]. For example, to say "It is possible that P" is to assert, for each way things could actually have gone, that P holds in at least one such "branch." However, this infinite-disjunctions strategy is not only mathematically cumbersome but also threatens to obscure the compositional semantics of modal operators: the familiar, intuitive interaction between ◇, □, and logical connectives becomes lost amid a sea of complicated, infinitary combinations[37]. As John Divers has argued, Branching Actualism "saves the appearance of parsimony only by introducing an arguably less plausible

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[33] Melvin Fitting & Richard L. Mendelsohn, *First-Order Modal Logic* (Springer, 1998), esp. ch. 2.
[34] Patrick Blackburn, Maarten de Rijke, & Yde Venema, *Modal Logic* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), ch. 1–3.
[35] For example, see standard textbooks: Brian Chellas, *Modal Logic* (Cambridge, 1980); Alexander Chagrov & Michael Zakharyaschev, *Modal Logic* (Oxford, 1997); and the *Handbook of Modal Logic*, ed. Blackburn, van Benthem, Wolter (Elsevier, 2007).
[36] For critique, see John Divers, *Possible Worlds* (Routledge, 2002), ch. 6.
[37] Ibid.; see also Timothy Williamson, *Modal Logic as Metaphysics* (Oxford, 2013), ch. 2.

and more conceptually opaque apparatus," as infinite actualized disjunctions are at least as metaphysically extravagant, and often more difficult to work with, than the regimented structure of possible worlds[38]. Furthermore, technical developments—such as canonical model constructions, filtrations, bisimulations, and interpolation theorems—are either greatly simplified or only possible in the context of KPWS, which provides both the conceptual scaffolding and the proof-theoretic tools needed for modal logic's most profound results[39].

The wide acceptance and continued dominance of KPWS are therefore no accident. Its model theory has provided the foundation for major results in modal logic, including the famous completeness and correspondence theorems, as well as deep connections to algebraic logic, topological semantics, and category theory[40]. Its influence extends far beyond philosophy—KPWS is the default framework for model checking in computer science, where possible worlds become states in transition systems; it is the backbone of formal semantics in linguistics, modeling meaning under context and uncertainty; and it remains central to contemporary debates in metaphysics about necessity, possibility, and counterfactuals[41]. These theoretical and practical virtues, combined with decades of refinement and widespread adoption, have solidified Kripke-Style Possible World Semantics as the unparalleled framework for modal logic.

Abandoning KPWS would not only mark a departure from the clearest and most widely endorsed framework for modal logic, but would also come at an immense technical

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[38] Divers, *Possible Worlds*, 143–147.
[39] Fitting & Mendelsohn, *First-Order Modal Logic*, ch. 4–6.
[40] See the survey by Johan van Benthem, *Modal Logic for Open Minds* (CSLI, 2010), ch. 5–8.
[41] For applications in computer science, see E. M. Clarke, O. Grumberg, & D. Peled, *Model Checking* (MIT Press, 1999); for linguistics, see Angelika Kratzer, "Modality," in *Semantics: An International Handbook of Natural Language Meaning*, ed. von Stechow & Wunderlich (Mouton de Gruyter, 1991), 639–650.

and conceptual cost for a range of disciplines. The model-theoretic tools enabled by KPWS—such as canonical models, filtrations, and bisimulation—are not mere technicalities; they are essential for establishing properties like completeness, compactness, interpolation, and decidability in modal systems, all of which are vital for rigorous logical analysis and proof-theoretic development. Metaphysicians would lose the precise tools necessary to analyze de re and de dicto modality, counterfactuals, and metaphysical necessity, while logicians would forfeit a powerful means of characterizing modal systems and studying their interrelations. In computer science, the abandonment of possible worlds semantics would cripple model checking, temporal logics, and system verification—areas foundational to software correctness, cybersecurity, and AI safety. For AI specialists, KPWS underpins modal and epistemic logics that are crucial for representing knowledge, belief, intention, and even multi-agent systems, rendering alternative approaches vastly less effective and expressive. Even in linguistics, possible worlds semantics is central to the compositional analysis of modality, conditionals, and attitude reports, forming the backbone of contemporary formal semantics. Thus, turning away from KPWS would amount to discarding a framework whose loss would be felt as a profound step backward across philosophy, logic, computation, and artificial intelligence.

In sum, KPWS is not only the historically and technically dominant framework for modal semantics, but also the most conceptually transparent, mathematically tractable, and philosophically fruitful system for illustrating and analyzing modal syntax. Its advantages over alternatives like Branching Actualism are both substantial and enduring, making it the standard against which all rival approaches must be measured.

Part F – MAB in Symbols, Plus a Formal Derivation of S5.

MAB in Symbols

(1)
$\forall x ((P(x) \& \Diamond B(x)) \rightarrow \Diamond EC(x))$

(2)
$\exists x \Diamond (B(x) \& (x =$ there being contingent concrete things$))$

(3)
$((1) \& (2)) \rightarrow \Diamond \exists x N(x)$

(4)
$\therefore \Diamond \exists x N(x)$

(5)
$\Diamond \exists x N(x) \rightarrow \exists x N(x)$ (S5)

(6)
$\therefore \exists x N(x)$

Predicates:

- **P(x):** "x is a positive state of affairs"
- **B(x):** "x begins to obtain"
- **EC(x):** "something external to x causes x to obtain"
- **N(x):** "x is a necessary being"—i.e., "x necessarily exists and is concrete (causally-capable)"

(As explained previously, a thing is 'concrete' if and only if, possibly, it causes something.)

Formal Derivation of S5

#	Formula	Justification
1	$\varphi \rightarrow \Box\Diamond\varphi$	Axiom B
2	$(\neg\Box\neg\varphi) \rightarrow \Box\Diamond(\neg\Box\neg\varphi)$	from 1 by substitution $\varphi{:=}\neg\Box\neg\varphi$
3	$\Box\neg\varphi \rightarrow \Box\Box\neg\varphi$	Axiom 4
4	$\neg\Box\Box\neg\varphi \rightarrow \neg\Box\neg\varphi$	from 3 by contraposition (classical PL)
5	$\neg\Box\neg(\neg\Box\neg\varphi) \rightarrow \neg\Box\neg\varphi$	from 4 and the propositional equivalence $\neg\Box\neg(\neg\Box\neg\varphi)\equiv\neg\Box\Box\neg\varphi$
6	$\Diamond(\neg\Box\neg\varphi) \rightarrow \Diamond\varphi$	from 5 by unfolding $\Diamond\xi{:=}\neg\Box\neg\xi$
7	$\Box(\Diamond(\neg\Box\neg\varphi) \rightarrow \Diamond\varphi)$	from 6 by Necessitation
8	$\Box\Diamond(\neg\Box\neg\varphi) \rightarrow \Box\Diamond\varphi$	from 7 and Axiom K ($\Box(p\rightarrow q)\rightarrow(\Box p\rightarrow\Box q)$), by Modus Ponens
9	$(\neg\Box\neg\varphi) \rightarrow \Box\Diamond\varphi$	from 2 and 8, HS

#	Formula	Justification
10	$\Diamond\varphi \rightarrow \Box\Diamond\varphi$	from 9 by unfolding $\Diamond\varphi :=\neg\Box\neg\varphi$

Equation 10 is exactly axiom 5. A standard result (and one easily formalized with classical equivalences and the □/◇ definition) is that every modal axiom has a dual obtained by swapping all boxes with diamonds and reversing the implication arrow. Applying that transformation to Axiom 5 immediately yields

$\Diamond\Box P \rightarrow \Box P$ (the dual of 5).

Because the dualization step is carried out by truth-functional manipulations inside the language (negation introduction, double-negation elimination, contrapositive, etc.), it can be reproduced in the Hilbert system using only MP, Nec and the base axioms; hence the resulting formula is a theorem of K + T + 4 + B, i.e. of S5.

Thus, we have formally derived, in Hilbert style and using only K, T, 4, B plus the two standard rules, the sought-after S5 theorem:

$\Diamond\Box P \rightarrow \Box P$ (If P is *possibly necessary*, then it is *necessary*).

All intermediate steps are valid in S5, and no additional axioms beyond K, T, 4, B were required. Additionally, one may perform an independent derivation of the famous S5 theorem via only K, T, and 5.

Here is such a derivation:

System: propositional logic + Modus Ponens; modal axioms **K**, **T**, **5** (only **5** is used).
Abbreviation: $\Diamond A := \neg\Box\neg A$

Goal: $\Diamond\Box P \rightarrow \Box P$

First, consider $\Diamond A \rightarrow \Box\Diamond A \equiv (\neg\Box\neg A) \rightarrow \Box(\neg\Box\neg A)$ (Axiom 5)

Now just **rename the schema variable**: let $B := \neg A$. The displayed instance becomes $\neg\Box B \rightarrow \Box\neg\Box B$.

Thus,

1. $\neg\Box P \rightarrow \Box\neg\Box P$ (Instance of 5. $\neg A := P$.)

2. $(\neg A \rightarrow B) \rightarrow (\neg B \rightarrow A)$
   –Propositional tautology (contraposition schema).

3. $(\neg\Box P \rightarrow \Box\neg\Box P) \rightarrow (\neg\Box\neg\Box P \rightarrow \Box P)$
   — From (2) by uniform substitution $A:=\Box P$, $B:=\Box\neg\Box P$

4. $\neg\Box\neg\Box P \rightarrow \Box P$ (From 1 and 3 by Modus Ponens)

5. $\Diamond\Box P \rightarrow \Box P$ (From (4) by definition $\Diamond\Box P \equiv \neg\Box\neg\Box P$)

QED. (Note: **K** and **T** are not even needed for this derivation.)

Part G – Responding to Objections from Branching Actualism

In recent years, certain philosophers (e.g., Schmid and Malpass) have attempted to sidestep MAB's force by embracing certain alternative views, such as Branching Actualism. This is, essentially, to take Escape Route #1, as already highlighted previously. As Footnote 25 notes, Branching Actualism is a minority position among philosophers currently working in the field of modal metaphysics. Most prefer to work with the standard Kripke-style Possible World Semantics. Now, the question obviously arises, besides ideological motivations (e.g., embracing an alternative view purely for the sake of rejecting MAB), why should we consider Branching Actualism? Even if, as philosophers Schmid and Malpass claim, Branching Actualism supplies an undercutter for MAB's second premise, the overarching question remains: why should we embrace Branching Actualism *in the first place?* In our own case, the Modal Argument from Beginnings (MAB) was originally framed inside ordinary Kripke-style possible-world semantics (KPWS), and it thus seems that we are within our epistemic rights to stay there unless the critic gives positive grounds for switching to Branching Actualism (BA). Merely *mentioning* BA is not such a ground. In philosophical debate we default to the most widely accepted background theory unless *both* parties agree to change it. KPWS is that default for modal logic and metaphysics.

As shown in Part E of the Appendix, the central appeal of the proponent of Branching Actualism to "ontological parsimony" simply doesn't go through. Jettisoning talk of "possible worlds" lands you in an infinite landscape of disjunctions and conjunctions, and so no genuine advance has been made. *Even if* Branching Actualism were

somehow deemed more parsimonious, that alone doesn't seal the deal. Parsimony is generally considered a tiebreaker among otherwise equal competing frameworks. But, as we've seen, KPWS' flexibility and analytic rigor could clearly provide reasons beyond parsimony to prefer it. So if the objector says, "But on BA your premise (2) is epistemically neutralized," we may answer: "True—but my argument was never running inside BA, and you haven't yet shown I should move there."

What concrete reasons might be given for why sticking with KPWS is reasonable? Here are four:

1. **The default, theory-neutral toolkit**
   KPWS underlies most contemporary modal logic, semantics for counterfactuals, and analytic-metaphysics work more broadly. Departing from it therefore raises the cost of entry for every further interlocutor.

2. **No deficit relative to BA for MAB**
   The Schmid–Malpass *symmetry* arises only because BA builds a **common-root clause** into its very definition of possibility. KPWS contains **no such clause**; nothing in standard recombination principles forces the defender of MAB to admit a past-infinite contingent cosmos as "equally possible" in every epistemic sense. (If a critic thinks recombination *does* force that result, they owe an argument.)

3. **Parity of patch-work constraints**
   BA advocates criticize KPWS because patch-work (recombination) seems to allow *too many* worlds, including paradoxical ones. But BA needs its own extra axiom (the common root). Once you tally the auxiliary assumptions, KPWS is no worse off in simplicity.

4. **Explanatory scope**
   BA's advertised advantages (e.g., grounding in actual powers, solutions to Benardete-type paradoxes) are neat, but none is **required** to formulate or evaluate MAB. Unless those advantages directly bear on temporal finitude or on premise (2), they are irrelevant bonuses.

In conversation, we might say, "I appreciate that under Branching Actualism my premise (2) faces a special symmetry challenge. But my modal premises are formulated inside Kripke-style semantics, which does not build in BA's common-root clause. Until we have an independent reason to adopt BA for this debate—one that outweighs the costs of switching frameworks—I'm entitled to proceed within the standard semantics. If you think BA is *compulsory*, please explain why KPWS is inadequate or incoherent for assessing MAB; otherwise, the objection is beside the point." Moreover, it's important to note that even if one fully embraces Branching Actualism as the preferred semantics, *even then* Schmid and Malpass' conclusion does not necessarily follow as obviously plausible. If, as they posit, there is an endless infinite regress, then the fundamental necessary truths turn out to basically be infinite disjunctions, which many may find implausible.

Thus, we are fully within our rational rights to remain in the standard Kripke framework unless and until the critic delivers positive, argument-level reasons to abandon it. This has yet to be cogently done. Without such reasons, the Branching Actualism detour is, from our standpoint, a non-starter.

The **C1** and **D1** principles, as developed by Joshua Rasmussen (and used in Independent Bridge I), may actually also hold the keys to unlocking further attributes of a Necessary Concrete Being (N) beyond mere personhood. The argument for omnipotence is based on the contingency of *finite* attributes and their *possibility* to be caused to arrive at the conclusion that the necessary being does *not* possess power in a limited way.

To reach this conclusion, Rasmussen (2009) performs a *reductio ad absurdum* by assuming that the necessary being N possesses a limited degree of power. Using the principles (C1) and (D1) that we presented earlier, the argument analyzes the consequences of applying them to this scenario.

(C1) establishes that any contingent property or relation *can* be causally explained. In conjunction with (D1), which states that any finite attribute possessed to a particular degree μ could have been instantiated to a degree μ – e or μ + e, it follows that any finite attribute is contingent and admits (that is, it is at least metaphysically possible) an explanation in causal terms, meaning that something external can explain the possession of that attribute by the entity that possesses it.

Now, the problem with assuming that N possesses power to a limited degree is that it would lead us to the conclusion that this property of N admits an explanation in causal terms. But this implies the absurd conclusion that N itself explains its contingent properties. Since N explains contingent reality (i.e., contingent objects and properties), it follows that N must possess some kind of power to explain its own contingent powers, which is circular. But this absurd scenario arises from the *assumption* that N

possesses power to a limited degree. Therefore, the assumption is false, and consequently, N possesses power in an *unlimited* way.

A simpler way to see the problem is as follows: a limited degree of power in N, and therefore contingent, would generate a certain level of dependence in the fundamental nature of N. That is, assuming that a necessary being possesses a limited degree of power implies that N possesses an intrinsic property contingently. But this is contradictory to the very notion of necessary existence, as the intrinsic properties (i.e., essence) of a necessary being are instantiated necessarily in all possible worlds. Asserting that an intrinsic property is instantiated contingently means that it does not exist in all possible worlds, and consequently, it would compromise the necessary existence (a se) of N. Therefore, N does *not* possess a limited degree of power but is *omnipotent.* Here is the formal argument:

1. N possesses a certain causal power (by definition of "creator being").

2. Suppose that N possesses a certain degree of limited power P (reductio).

3. Therefore, N could possibly have power to the degree of P+e or P–e.

4. Therefore, the degree of power P of N is contingent.

5. Therefore, this property can be causally explained.

6. But N is the cause of all contingent things and properties in *w* (Stage I and principle (C1)).

7. Therefore, the contingent power of N is ultimately explained by the causal activity of N.

8. But (7) is a circular explanation since the power of N is explained by the causal activity of N, which requires power in the first place.

9. Therefore, the power of N cannot be contingent.

10. But (9) contradicts (4).

11. Therefore, the assumption (2) is false.

12. Therefore, the power of N is unlimited.

13. Therefore, N is omnipotent.

Thus, it would seem that, given principles (C1) and (D1), N is *omnipotent*—that is, it is able to actualize any metaphysically possible contingent state of affairs.

The attribute of omniscience is another classical aspect of philosophical theism, implying the possession of unlimited or maximal knowledge. This argument for omniscience uses the same strategy as previously employed to demonstrate that possessing finite knowledge implies contingency and that, therefore, the necessary being N cannot possess this quality to a limited degree.

By utilizing the principles (C1) and (D1), Rasmussen (2009) conducts *a reductio ad absurdum* as follows: Suppose that N possesses a limited degree of knowledge K. This initial assumption naturally follows since N, as we have already established, is an agent with volition and therefore capable of having knowledge. However, due to (C1), it follows that any finite attribute, instantiated to a limited degree, implies contingency, and this allows for the possibility of an external causal explanation, as per (D1). In

other words, the degree of knowledge K possessed by N is contingent and thus could admit an explanation in terms of something external that is the cause of the instantiation of this attribute.

Again, as argued previously, this scenario leads us to the absurd conclusion that N itself explains its contingent properties. This is because N, being the ultimate explanation of contingent reality (i.e., contingent objects and properties), must possess some form of knowledge to cause that contingency, including its own finite knowledge, which is circular, as it would be using its knowledge to explain the possession of that knowledge itself. Alternatively, we can say that if an intrinsic property is instantiated contingently, it means that it does not exist in all possible worlds, and consequently, it would compromise the necessary existence (a se) of N. Therefore, the assumption that N possesses limited knowledge is false, and it follows that N is omniscient.[42] Here is the formal argument:

1. N possesses certain knowledge due to its volitional agency.

2. Suppose N possesses a certain degree of limited knowledge K (reductio).

3. Therefore, N could possibly have knowledge to the degree K+e or K–e.

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[42] When we speak of N's knowledge, we refer to the state of knowledge or its capacity to know a certain set of true *propositions*, and not the truth value of the propositions themselves. This avoids the confusion of thinking that since N cannot have a limited and contingent knowledge state, then the propositions known by N will not be contingent either, leading to a modal collapse. One thing is the state or capacity for unlimited knowledge (non-contingent) of N, and another thing is the propositions (contingent or not) known by N.

4. Therefore, the degree of knowledge K of N is contingent.

5. Therefore, this property can be causally explained.

6. But N is the cause of all contingent things and properties in the world w (Stage I and Principle (C1)).

7. Therefore, the contingent knowledge of N is ultimately explained by N's causal activity.

8. But (7) is a circular explanation, as N's knowledge is explained by N's causal activity, which requires knowledge in the first place.

9. Therefore, N's knowledge cannot be contingent.

10. But (9) contradicts (4).

11. Therefore, the assumption (2) is false.

12. Therefore, N's knowledge is unlimited.

13. Therefore, N is omniscient.

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Part II – History

I. The Link

"*I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness … for I did not come to judge the world but to save the world.*"
—Jesus of Nazareth, *(John 12:46-47 ESV)*

There are few questions more momentous, more devastating in their consequence, than this: *Did Jesus of Nazareth rise from the dead?* The stakes could not be higher. If the resurrection is a myth, a pious legend, or a tragic self-deception, then all of Christianity collapses into dust. Its promises of life beyond the grave dissolve into wishful thinking, its moral demands become an empty burden, and its vision of redemption shrinks into a cruel mirage. The grave remains the great equalizer, time the great destroyer, and despair the final truth of human existence.

But if the resurrection is true—if a crucified Galilean peasant, publicly executed under Roman authority, walked out of his tomb in history, in flesh and blood—then everything changes. Then death is not the final word. Then despair does not hold the last card. Then history itself bends toward a horizon of hope. And more still: if Christ truly rose, He is vindicated in all that He claimed about Himself—that He is the Son of God, the unique revealer of the divine, the one in whom the world's story finds its center.

For what Part I argued on the plane of pure reason—that reality is grounded in a Necessary Mind capable of causation—the resurrection would demonstrate in time and space. It would mean that the Necessary Being has not remained hidden in abstraction, but has stepped forward into history, clothed in flesh, to speak and act in our midst. The metaphysical Absolute, once only glimpsed in logic

and necessity, would have shown its face, its character, its intentions, through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. What philosophy can only whisper about—an eternal mind behind contingency—the resurrection would shout from an empty tomb: *this is who God is.*

And what would such a revelation mean? It would mean that the ground of reality is not an indifferent force, nor an impersonal abstraction, but a personal agent who acts in love. It would mean that the moral call upon humanity is not arbitrary, but rooted in the very heart of reality itself. It would mean that existence is not absurd, but has a purpose, a telos, a destiny. In Christ, the Necessary Mind would not only explain why there is something rather than nothing—it would declare why there is hope rather than despair, redemption rather than futility.

If the resurrection is true, then Christ is not merely another prophet or moral teacher. He is not merely one among many religious voices in the marketplace of spiritual ideas. He is *the Avatar*—not in the Eastern sense of a temporary divine manifestation, but in the radical sense that God Himself, the very Necessary Mind who sustains all things, has crossed the infinite divide to rescue His creation. And to rescue us from what? A malevolent villain threatening to harm us from the outside, as is often portrayed? No. From our *own* evil. From the evil we find within *ourselves*. And not only that, but to save us from death itself, and to grant us "eternal life"—a genuine, continued conscious existence that never will fade, but, like God, will live forever. For Jesus, *that* is what it means to save the world.

This is why the resurrection matters. This is why the stakes are absolute. If Christ has not been raised, human life is finally absurd: a fleeting spark cast into a cosmic abyss. But if Christ has been raised, then human life is incalculably precious, eternally significant, swept up into the very life of God. It is not merely a question for historians. It is the question upon which hangs the meaning of existence itself.

The claim that Jesus of Nazareth rose bodily from the dead stands at the crossroads of history and faith. To assess it responsibly, one must take account of how scholars have studied the New Testament over the centuries. The history of biblical criticism is itself a story of shifting assumptions, evolving methods, and debates over what can be known of Jesus and the early Christian movement.

For the first fifteen centuries of Christianity, the New Testament was largely received within the Church as divinely inspired testimony. The focus of theologians such as Augustine, Aquinas, and the Reformers was not on *whether* the text was historically reliable, but on how to interpret it faithfully. Questions of historical method, literary form, and authorship were subordinated to the conviction that Scripture bore authoritative witness to God's revelation in Christ. Even during the Reformation, when figures like Martin Luther emphasized the primacy of Scripture over Church tradition, the New Testament was read primarily through theological rather than critical-historical lenses. The reliability of the Gospels was assumed, and disputes centered more on doctrine than on historicity.

The Enlightenment brought a radical shift. As rationalism and empiricism challenged traditional authorities, scholars began to scrutinize the Bible with the same critical tools used for classical texts. Baruch Spinoza questioned Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, setting a precedent for source criticism. Deists such as Thomas Jefferson treated miraculous elements as mythological accretions, preserving only Jesus' ethical teaching. In the eighteenth century, the "quest for the historical Jesus" was born. Hermann Samuel Reimarus argued that the disciples fabricated the resurrection to perpetuate Jesus' movement, a thesis published posthumously and scandalizing Europe. Rationalist interpreters sought natural explanations for miracles, while others, such as David Hume, declared them philosophically impossible. Thus, the very possibility of resurrection was placed under suspicion, and historical criticism became the dominant mode of academic inquiry.

The nineteenth century saw an explosion of historical-critical studies, particularly in Germany. Scholars like David Friedrich Strauss argued that the Gospels were mythological expressions of early Christian faith, not historical accounts. Strauss' *Life of Jesus Critically Examined* (1835) was groundbreaking, proposing that miraculous narratives arose through myth-making rather than eyewitness reporting. Meanwhile, the Tübingen School, under Ferdinand Christian Baur, interpreted the New Testament in terms of Hegelian dialectic, viewing it as a record of conflicts between Jewish Christianity (Peter) and Gentile Christianity (Paul). Liberal theologians such as Adolf von Harnack emphasized the ethical kernel of Christianity, stripping away its miraculous shell. By the end of the century, confidence was high that critical methods could reconstruct the "real Jesus," distinct from the "Christ of faith." Yet, as Albert Schweitzer's 1906 *Quest of the Historical Jesus* showed, such reconstructions often reflected the biases of their authors more than the realities of first-century Judea. Schweitzer concluded that Jesus was an apocalyptic prophet whose radical message had been misunderstood by modern rationalists.

The twentieth century opened with deep skepticism. Rudolf Bultmann, the great existentialist theologian, argued that almost nothing could be known of the historical Jesus, and that faith must rest on existential encounter rather than historical fact. He called for "demythologizing" the New Testament, reinterpreting its mythical language in existential categories. Yet, Bultmann's radical skepticism provoked reactions. His own students, known as the "New Quest" scholars, insisted that something could indeed be recovered of Jesus' life and message. Archaeological discoveries, such as the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Nag Hammadi texts, deepened historical understanding of Judaism and early Christianity, challenging simplistic reconstructions. By mid-century, critical consensus began to shift. Scholars such as Joachim Jeremias and C.H. Dodd argued for the plausibility of Jesus' parables, teachings, and eschatological outlook. In the latter part of the century, a "Third Quest" for the historical Jesus emerged,

emphasizing Jesus' Jewish context and situating him within first-century apocalyptic Judaism, with figures such as E.P. Sanders and Geza Vermes leading the way. This quest rejected both the skeptical extremes of Bultmann and the rationalist reconstructions of the nineteenth century, instead highlighting Jesus as a credible figure in history.

Today, New Testament studies are more diverse than ever. Postmodern approaches emphasize the literary, sociological, and cultural dimensions of the texts, often wary of sweeping claims to objectivity. Meanwhile, traditional historical-critical tools remain in use, but now supplemented by interdisciplinary methods: archaeology, social-scientific criticism, memory studies, and oral tradition analysis. Most significantly for the resurrection, a surprising degree of consensus has emerged on certain core facts about Jesus' death and the origins of Christianity. While scholars disagree on explanations, even skeptical historians generally concede that Jesus was crucified, that his disciples sincerely believed he had risen, that the tomb was reported empty, and that the early Christian movement exploded rapidly on this basis. This has given rise to what apologists call the "Minimal Facts" approach, pioneered by scholars like Gary Habermas and William Lane Craig.

Thus, the story of New Testament criticism is not one of simple decline from faith to skepticism, nor of linear progress toward certainty. It is a dialectic of doubt and rediscovery, skepticism and renewal. What has changed most is not the stubborn facts of history, but the philosophical lenses through which scholars have viewed them. Where some have seen myth, others have seen memory; where some have found delusion, others have discerned truth.

Are the Gospels and Paul's Epistles historically credible? When approaching the New Testament as historical evidence, scholars face a fundamental methodological question: are the documents guilty until proven innocent, or innocent until proven guilty? Skeptics often take the former

stance, treating the Gospels as theological propaganda whose historical value must be painstakingly rescued, if it exists at all. Believers, by contrast, typically assume their trustworthiness from the outset. The objective historian, however, ought to take a position of *neutrality*. The Gospels and epistles are ancient documents of the first century; they deserve neither automatic rejection nor uncritical acceptance, but the same sober evaluation that historians give to other texts of antiquity.

When assessed by the standards of Greco-Roman historiography, the New Testament sources prove remarkably early and well-attested. In fact, many prominent scholars now believe that there was simply insufficient time for legendary influences to expunge the core historical facts. The distinguished Oxford historian A. N. Sherwin-White, specialized in Greco-Roman history of times prior to and contemporaneous with Jesus, made precisely this point in his *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament* (1963). According to Professor White, the sources for Roman and Greek history are often biased and removed several generations or even centuries from the events they describe. And yet, historians reconstruct with confidence the course of Roman and Greek history.

The earliest biographies of Alexander the Great, for example, were written by Arrian and Plutarch more than four centuries after Alexander's death. And yet classical historians are able to reconstruct the course of his campaigns and character with considerable confidence. Indeed, as Sherwin-White stresses, the truly fabulous legends about Alexander—those portraying him as a divine demi-god performing mythical feats—do not appear until centuries *after* Arrian and Plutarch, in late sources. According to Sherwin White, the writings of Herodotus enable us to determine the rate at which legend accumulates, and the tests show that even two generations is too short a time span to allow legendary tendencies to wipe out the hard core of historical facts. When Professor Sherwin White turns to the Gospels, he states that for the

Gospels to be in their core legends, the rate of legendary accumulation would have to be *unbelievable*. All historians agree that the Gospels were written down and circulated during the first generation after the events, while the eyewitnesses were still alive. In order for the Gospels to be legendary at their core, more generations would be needed. In fact, adding a time gap of two generations to Jesus' death in AD 30 lands you in the second century, when the apocryphal gospels (e.g., Gospel of Peter) first begin to appear. These do contain all sorts of fabulous stories about Jesus, trying to fill in the years between his boyhood and the commencement of his ministry, for example.

This is especially striking given the dating of the Gospel traditions. Most scholars agree that the Synoptic Gospels (Mark, Matthew, Luke) were composed between AD 60–90, within a generation of Jesus' crucifixion. John is usually placed a bit later, but still within living memory of the events. Crucially, the Gospels themselves rely on even earlier *sources*. The Passion Narrative—the account of Jesus' arrest, trial, crucifixion, and burial—was not composed ex nihilo by Mark, but was based on an earlier source. Rudolf Pesch, a leading German specialist on Mark, dates this Passion source to the mid-30s AD, around AD 37—barely seven years after the crucifixion. At such an early date, the possibility of wholesale invention collapses, for eyewitnesses—both friendly and hostile—were still alive and able to correct distortions.

The evidence for early tradition is even stronger in the epistles of Paul, which *predate* the Gospels by one to two decades. Paul's letters, undisputed even by the most skeptical scholars (e.g., 1 Thessalonians, Galatians, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Romans, Philippians, Philemon), provide firsthand testimony to the beliefs and practices of the earliest Christian communities. In these letters Paul not only relays Jesus' teachings (cf. 1 Corinthians 7), but also rehearses traditions about the Last Supper (1 Corinthians 11), the crucifixion and burial (1 Corinthians 15), and the post-mortem appearances of Jesus. One of the most significant texts is 1 Corinthians 15:3–7, where Paul cites a

creed he had "received" and then "passed on." Critical scholars, including James D. G. Dunn and Larry Hurtado, date this creed to within five years of Jesus' death, with some (e.g., Joachim Jeremias, Ulrich Wilckens) placing it as early as two years afterward. N. T. Wright notes that this creed represents "the earliest Christian tradition we possess." Some scholars even go so far as to say that the creed must have originated within *months* of the original events. Such proximity makes thorough legendary development virtually impossible.

Moreover, the Gospels demonstrate a proven track record of historical reliability in areas where their claims can be tested. Let us look at just one example: Luke. Luke is credited with writing a two-volume work: the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles. Although they appear separately in the New Testament, they are really parts of a single composition, divided only because the early church chose to group all four Gospels together. Among the Gospel writers, Luke is the one who most deliberately presents himself as a historian. In the opening lines of his account, he states:

"Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught." (Luke 1:1–4, ESV)

This introduction is written in polished, classical Greek, the sort of style used by the great Greek historians. Afterward, however, Luke shifts into a simpler, more common Greek. By doing so, he signals to the reader that he is capable of writing at the scholarly level but chooses accessibility for his audience. He emphasizes that his narrative comes from

a careful, extended investigation and is grounded in eyewitness testimony. Who, then, was this figure we call Luke? From his own writing, it is clear he was not personally an eyewitness to Jesus' life. Yet, an important clue about him surfaces in the book of Acts. Starting in chapter 16, when Paul arrives in Troas (modern-day Turkey), the narrative suddenly shifts into first-person plural: "*We* set sail from Troas to Samothrace," "*We* remained in Philippi some days," "As *we* were going to the place of prayer," and so forth. The simplest and most natural explanation is that the author himself joined Paul on his missionary travels across the Mediterranean world. Eventually, he journeys with Paul back to Israel and ultimately to Jerusalem. This strongly indicates that the author of Luke–Acts had direct access to those who personally witnessed Jesus' ministry while in Jerusalem.

Skeptical critics, however, have tried to dismiss this conclusion by arguing that the "we" sections in Acts were not literal but rather a stylistic convention used in ancient sea voyage stories. The problem is that many of these passages describe events on land, not at sea. More significantly, no such literary convention actually existed in antiquity; the notion is a modern scholarly fabrication. The evidence points inescapably to the fact that Luke–Acts was authored by a traveling companion of Paul who also had the opportunity to interview eyewitnesses of Jesus' life. So, who might some of these eyewitnesses have been? One way to investigate is by identifying what material is unique to Luke's Gospel compared to the other Gospels. Strikingly, much of what is distinctive in Luke revolves around the women who followed Jesus—figures such as Joanna, Susanna, and most notably, Mary, the mother of Jesus.

But was Luke a careful historian? The book of Acts provides the test. Acts overlaps extensively with known secular history of the first century, and its accuracy has been confirmed repeatedly. Classical scholar Colin Hemer, in his work *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History*, meticulously examined Acts and uncovered an

extraordinary level of historical precision. His analysis demonstrates that Luke accurately records everything from the movement of the Alexandrian grain fleet, to the geography of Mediterranean coastlines, to the varying and sometimes obscure titles of local officials. Time and again, Luke proves to be correct.

As Professor Sherwin-White observed: "The confirmation of historicity in Acts is overwhelming. Any attempt to reject its historicity even in matters of detail must now appear absurd."[43] Similarly, the verdict of the renowned archaeologist Sir William Ramsay still holds: "Luke is a historian of the first rank.... This author should be placed among the very greatest of historians."[44] Given Luke's demonstrated precision, his evident concern for accuracy, and his firsthand contact with eyewitnesses from the earliest generation of Christians, the reliability of this author stands on firm ground.

Taken together, these considerations converge on a powerful conclusion. The New Testament writings, especially Paul's epistles and the Gospels, were written too close in time to the events of Jesus' life, death, and purported resurrection to allow for the complete displacement of fact by legend. Their sources reach back within a handful of years of the crucifixion. Their claims are interwoven with checks from living eyewitnesses and embedded in historical contexts that can be tested. And where such claims can be tested, they largely prove accurate. By the standards applied to other works of ancient history, the New Testament documents are not late, untrustworthy legends. They are early, historically credible testimonies—documents that deserve to be treated with the

[43] A. N. Sherwin-White, Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament (Oxford: Clarendon, 1963), 189.
[44] William M. Ramsay, The Bearing of Recent Discovery on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1915), 222.

same seriousness as, if not more than, our sources for Alexander, Caesar, or Augustus.

It is crucial to emphasize at this juncture that the argument for the historical credibility of the New Testament is not an argument for biblical inerrancy. The case being made here does not require that every verse of the Gospels be flawless or that every detail be harmonized into a seamless whole. Rather, it is grounded in the sober discipline of contemporary New Testament textual criticism and historical method. These disciplines ask a more modest, but in many ways more powerful, question: do the New Testament writings preserve reliable access to the core events of Jesus' life and the origins of Christianity?

On this question, the evidence appears robust. The Gospels preserve traditions that are not only early, but also independently attested across multiple sources. The principle of multiple attestation is a cornerstone of historical method: when independent sources converge on the same event or saying, the probability of its authenticity increases substantially. Thus, Jesus' crucifixion, burial, and post-mortem appearances are not the product of a single theological agenda, but appear across diverse and independent streams of tradition—Paul's letters, Mark's Passion source, Q sayings material, special L and M sources, and later Johannine traditions. This independence demonstrates that the core facts were deeply embedded in the earliest Christian memory and not the invention of a single author or community.

Moreover, the very presence of minor discrepancies between the Gospels, far from undermining their historical value, actually strengthens the case for their independence. Historians recognize that when witnesses to an event produce accounts that agree in substance but diverge in incidental detail, this is a hallmark of authenticity rather than fabrication. If the Gospels presented a perfectly harmonized narrative, it would suggest collusion or artificial smoothing. Instead, the differences—whether in

the order of resurrection appearances, in the wording of the inscription on the cross, or in the precise identity of the women at the tomb—reflect the marks of genuine, independent traditions that circulated in the earliest communities. As Richard Bauckham has argued in *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, these variations testify to the living memory of real participants, not to legendary invention.

Thus, contemporary scholarship can affirm with confidence that the Gospels preserve robust historical traditions without requiring a doctrine of inerrancy. They are neither perfect stenographic transcripts nor late legendary fictions. They are, rather, early testimonies rooted in eyewitness memory, transmitted through independent lines of tradition, and preserved within living communities that still contained those who had seen and heard Jesus firsthand. In this sense, the small imperfections of the texts serve to highlight, rather than obscure, their essential reliability.

All of this, once again, is *not* to suggest that we must blindly affirm every detail of the Gospels or Paul's letters as unquestionable. That would be as uncritical as the skeptical posture which dismisses them wholesale. The aim is instead to situate ourselves at a position of *neutrality*, where the New Testament writings are treated with the same methodological respect as other ancient sources. From such a vantage point, the texts may be weighed on their merits, not on prior dogmatic commitments, whether of faith or doubt.

Once this neutrality is established, historians can apply the well-developed tools of critical analysis to evaluate individual sayings or incidents attributed to Jesus. Modern historical criteria allow us to move beyond sweeping generalizations and to make reasoned judgments about particular traditions. For example, the criterion of *historical congruence* (or contextual credibility) asks whether a tradition coheres with what we know of first-century Palestinian Judaism, Roman rule, or wider Mediterranean culture. The criterion of *multiple attestation* weighs

whether an event or saying appears across independent streams of tradition, increasing its historical plausibility.

Similarly, the criterion of *embarrassment* suggests that material unlikely to have been invented by the early Church—such as Peter's denial of Jesus or the discovery of the empty tomb by women, whose testimony had little legal standing in antiquity—is more likely to be historical. The criterion of *dissimilarity* evaluates whether a saying or action differs both from typical Jewish expectation and from early Christian theological development, thus suggesting its authenticity as originating from Jesus himself. Linguistic analysis also plays a role: *Semitisms*—traces of Aramaic idiom underlying the Greek texts—indicate that we are dealing with very early traditions rooted in the Semitic environment of Jesus' ministry. Finally, the criterion of *coherence* allows traditions already established as authentic to shed light on the credibility of related material.

These criteria, though not infallible, provide a structured and disciplined way to sift historical fact from later embellishment. Applied to the New Testament sources, they yield a striking pattern: at the core of the Jesus tradition stand events and teachings that meet multiple criteria of authenticity. This does not mean that every pericope can be verified with certainty, but it does mean that historians can establish with reasonable confidence a solid framework of events—Jesus' baptism, ministry, crucifixion, and the explosive belief in his resurrection—that demands explanation. Far from requiring blind faith, such an approach invites careful and critical engagement with the evidence, leading us step by step to the question that looms largest: what, if anything, can account for the rise of the Christian proclamation that Jesus had conquered death?

In light of the history of New Testament criticism and the methodological neutrality established above, we now turn to what has become known as the "Minimal Facts"

approach. This method, developed most notably by Gary Habermas and refined by William Lane Craig and others, focuses on a set of core facts about Jesus of Nazareth that meet two strict criteria: (1) they are so strongly evidenced historically that they are accepted by the vast majority of scholars who study the subject, including critical and skeptical scholars; and (2) they are accepted because of the historical evidence, not because of theological presuppositions. These "minimal" facts therefore provide a reliable starting point for inquiry, independent of doctrinal commitments.

Contemporary historical Jesus scholarship has, after more than two centuries of rigorous scrutiny, reached something approaching a consensus on these points. They do not represent the totality of Christian claims, but they do represent the bedrock of what professional historians of antiquity agree can be established about Jesus. Let us briefly examine them in turn.

1. Jesus Existed

The overwhelming consensus of historians is that Jesus of Nazareth was a real historical figure. Skeptical scholars such as Bart Ehrman insist that mythicist claims (that Jesus never existed) are fringe positions with no standing in the academic guild. As Ehrman puts it: *"The idea that Jesus did not exist is so extreme that it never occurs to even most critical scholars to take it seriously."* (Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, 2012). Independent attestation from non-Christian sources (Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44; Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.3.3; Pliny the Younger, *Letters* 10.96) further corroborates that Jesus lived and was known as a wonder-worker and crucified teacher in Judea.

2. Jesus Believed He Had a Unique, Eschatological Relationship with God

Historical Jesus research demonstrates that Jesus proclaimed the arrival of God's kingdom in a unique way that placed himself at its center. E.P. Sanders, a leading Jewish historian, affirms that Jesus' central message was "the coming of the kingdom of God" (*The Historical Figure of Jesus*, 1993). Jesus' frequent references to God as "Abba" (Father) and his role as eschatological judge (cf. Mark 14:61–62; Matthew 11:27) underscore his self-understanding as having a unique sonship to God. James D.G. Dunn argues that Jesus' sense of filial intimacy with God was "unparalleled" in Second Temple Judaism (*Jesus Remembered*, 2003). While scholars debate the precise contours, the consensus is that Jesus believed himself to stand in a special, decisive relationship with God at the turning point of history.

3. Jesus met His Death by Roman Crucifixion and was Buried by Joseph of Arimathea

The crucifixion of Jesus under Pontius Pilate is among the most secure facts of ancient history, acknowledged by virtually all scholars. John Dominic Crossan, a skeptical member of the Jesus Seminar, writes: *"That he was crucified is as sure as anything historical can ever be."* (*Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, 1994). The burial by Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Sanhedrin, is widely regarded as historically credible because it is independently attested in multiple traditions (Mark, Matthew, John, Acts) and unlikely to be invented, since it places a member of the Jewish leadership—otherwise hostile to the Christian movement—in a positive role. The burial tradition also gains credibility from its inclusion in the early Passion source used by Mark, which most scholars date to within a decade of Jesus' death.

4. The Empty Tomb

Although not unanimously accepted (75%), the majority of scholars today affirm the historicity of the empty tomb. N.T. Wright argues that "the empty tomb and the appearances of Jesus together provide the only possible explanation" for the rise of Easter faith (*The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 2003). The earliest report of the empty tomb, discovered by women followers of Jesus, passes the criterion of embarrassment, since women's testimony carried very little weight in the ancient world. Moreover, the empty tomb is independently attested in Mark, Matthew, Luke, John, and Acts, with variations that suggest multiple streams of tradition. Finally, the empty tomb is confirmed by enemy attestation, since the earliest Jewish polemic implicitly acknowledged the tomb's vacancy ("the disciples stole his body"). Historian Michael Grant, no theological apologist, acknowledged: *"If we apply the same sort of criteria that we would apply to any other ancient source, the evidence is firm and plausible enough to necessitate the conclusion that the tomb was indeed found empty."* (*Jesus: An Historian's Review of the Gospels*, 1977).

5. Post-Mortem Appearances of Jesus

Perhaps the most widely accepted minimal fact is that individuals and groups of Jesus' followers had experiences they interpreted as appearances of the risen Christ. Gerd Lüdemann, a skeptical German New Testament scholar and atheist, concedes: *"It may be taken as historically certain that Peter and the disciples had experiences after Jesus' death in which Jesus appeared to them as the risen Christ."* (*What Really Happened to Jesus?*, 1995). These appearances were reported in a variety of modes—visual, auditory, physical encounters—and to diverse individuals (Peter, the Twelve, James, Paul) and groups, both small and large. The multiple independent attestation of these traditions in Paul's passed-on creed (1 Corinthians 15), who had personal contact with many of the earliest

Christians, the Gospels, and Acts strengthens their historical credibility.

6. The Disciples' Transformation

The sudden and sincere belief of the disciples that God had raised Jesus from the dead is itself a historical datum requiring explanation. Prior to Easter, the disciples were demoralized and in hiding after their teacher's crucifixion, an event that Jewish expectation identified as a sign of being under God's curse (Deut. 21:23). Yet, shortly thereafter, these same individuals boldly proclaimed the resurrection in Jerusalem—the very city of Jesus' execution—at great personal risk. Historians recognize the sincerity of their belief, demonstrated in their willingness to suffer persecution and, in some cases, martyrdom. Moreover, the *content* of their proclamation was startling. That a single individual would suddenly be raised apart from and prior to the general resurrection at the end of the world was an idea wholly foreign to 1st century Jewish thought.

7. The Conversion of James

One of the most remarkable post-resurrection appearances and conversions is that of James, the younger brother of Jesus. What makes this extraordinary is that, according to the Gospels, James and his brothers did not believe in Jesus during his earthly ministry (Mark 3:21, 31–35; John 7:1–10). They rejected his claims, not regarding him as the Messiah, a prophet, or even anyone of significance. By the criterion of embarrassment, this unbelief is almost certainly a genuine historical detail of Jesus' life. Yet after the resurrection, we find Jesus' brothers among the believers gathered in the upper room at Jerusalem (Acts 1:14). The next time James surfaces is in Acts 12:17, during the account of Peter's miraculous release from prison. Peter's instruction is telling: "Report this to James."

Paul provides further insight in Galatians 1:19, recalling his visit to Jerusalem about three years after his Damascus Road encounter. He notes that apart from Peter, "I saw none of the other apostles *except James* the Lord's brother." This indicates that James was already being regarded as an apostle. When Paul returned to Jerusalem fourteen years later, he described the three "pillars" of the church as Peter, John, and *James* (Gal. 2:9). Later, in Acts 21:18, James appears as the sole leader of the Jerusalem church, presiding over its council of elders. The New Testament records nothing further about him, but Josephus, the Jewish historian, reports that James was unlawfully executed by stoning at the hands of the Sanhedrin sometime after A.D. 60, because of his faith in Christ (Antiquities of the Jews 20.200). Moreover, James was not alone in his conversion: Jesus' other brothers also came to faith and became active in Christian ministry. Paul even alludes to this in 1 Corinthians 9:5 (RSV): "Do we not have the right to be accompanied by a wife, as the other apostles and *the brothers of the Lord* and Cephas?"

How are we to understand this dramatic change? On the one hand, the evidence is clear that Jesus' siblings were skeptical during his lifetime. On the other, it is equally clear that they later became fervent followers, with James himself martyred for his confession of faith. Jesus' crucifixion would only have reinforced James's conviction that his brother's messianic claims were delusory. Many of us have brothers—what would it take to persuade you that your brother was the Lord, and to die for that conviction, as James ultimately did? Even the critical New Testament scholar Hans Grass concedes that James's conversion stands as one of the strongest evidences for the resurrection of Jesus Christ.[45]

[45] Hans Grass, Ostergeschehen und Osterberichte, 4th ed. (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1974), 80.

8. The Conversion of Paul

The final recorded appearance and conversion is no less extraordinary than the one to James. As Paul himself declares, "Last of all… he appeared to me also." The dramatic encounter of Saul of Tarsus—later known as Paul—on the road to Damascus is first recounted in Acts 9:1–9 and then retold twice more in the book of Acts. That something truly happened on this occasion is confirmed beyond question by Paul's own repeated references to it in his letters.

This experience utterly transformed Saul's life. Prior to it, he was a rabbi, a Pharisee, and a respected figure within Judaism. Fiercely opposed to what he considered the dangerous heresy of the Christians, he devoted himself to destroying the movement, even participating in the *execution* of its adherents. Then, in a single moment, everything changed. He relinquished his standing as a prominent Jewish authority and embraced the very faith he had once tried to extinguish. From then on, he lived as a missionary of Christ—a life marked not by prestige but by poverty, relentless toil, and constant suffering. Paul endured floggings, beatings, stonings (once left for dead), three shipwrecks, and continual exposure to danger, want, and deep anxiety. Ultimately, he sealed his testimony with martyrdom in Rome. And what lay behind such a radical reversal? Paul himself gives the reason: on that fateful day outside Damascus, he encountered "Jesus our Lord" (1 Cor. 9:1). Even critics like Lüdemann affirm the reality of Paul's experience: *"Paul's conversion is not to be denied; it is a historical fact."* (*What Really Happened to Jesus?*, 1995).

The Minimal Facts, in total, may thus be listed as follows:

1. Jesus existed.
2. Jesus believed he had a unique, eschatological relationship with God, possibly as his son.

3. Jesus met his death by Roman crucifixion and was subsequently buried by Joseph of Arimathea in a tomb.
4. On the Sunday morning after his crucifixion, Jesus' tomb was found empty by a group of his women followers.
5. Thereafter, different individuals and groups of people, at different times, places, and circumstances, had multimodal experiences of appearances of Jesus alive after his death.
6. The disciples, among other individuals, came to suddenly and sincerely believe that God had raised Jesus from the dead, to the extent that some of them were willing to die for the truth of that belief.
7. The conversion of James, a former skeptic.
8. The conversion of Paul, formerly an ardent persecutor of Christians.

Taken together, these eight facts represent the firm ground on which historical investigation of the resurrection must proceed. They are not the product of theological bias but of decades of rigorous scholarly investigation across confessional lines. Their "minimal" character lies in the breadth of agreement they command: even skeptical scholars affirm them, because the historical evidence compels it. The question that remains—the question that divides—is *not* whether these facts occurred, but what *best explains them*.

It must be stressed that my purpose here is not to defend or re-establish these eight minimal facts in exhaustive detail. They have already been established through decades of rigorous historical inquiry and are widely recognized in contemporary New Testament criticism. My task is not to rehash every argument or survey every piece of evidence, but to note that the consensus exists and to demonstrate

how these facts, once acknowledged, press us toward a serious consideration of the resurrection hypothesis.

Readers who wish to explore the historical grounding of these facts in greater depth are invited to consult the work of leading scholars across the spectrum of belief.[46] Gary Habermas has produced the most comprehensive survey of scholarly opinion, spanning more than 3,400 publications over the last half-century, in *The Risen Jesus and Future Hope* (2003) and numerous journal articles. William Lane Craig's *The Son Rises* (1981) and *Reasonable Faith* (3rd ed., 2008) provide careful philosophical and historical argumentation for the resurrection. N. T. Wright's magisterial *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (2003) situates the Easter claim in its Jewish and Greco-Roman context with unparalleled historical depth.

For more skeptical treatments that nonetheless affirm many of the same facts, see Bart D. Ehrman's *How Jesus Became God* (2014), E. P. Sanders' *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (1993), and James D. G. Dunn's *Jesus Remembered* (2003). On the appearances of Jesus and their psychological plausibility, Gerd Lüdemann's *What Really Happened to Jesus?* (1995) is an important resource, as is Dale Allison's nuanced study *Resurrecting Jesus* (2005). On Acts and the credibility of Luke as a historian, Colin Hemer's *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History* (1989) remains a standard reference. Finally, Richard Bauckham's *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* (2006) provides an in-depth exploration of how eyewitness testimony undergirds much of the Gospel tradition.

Together, these works provide ample demonstration that the minimal facts are not speculative or sectarian assertions, but the fruit of broad scholarly engagement across confessional lines. It is on *this* foundation that we *now* proceed to consider the criteria for evaluating

[46] Additionally, there is a very brief exposition of the Minimal Facts in the Appendix (Part A).

competing explanations for these facts, and to ask what best accounts for the extraordinary origins of the Christian movement.

Having surveyed the minimal facts that enjoy broad scholarly consensus, the next task is to ask: *What best explains these data?* In historical reasoning, as in the sciences, the goal is not absolute certainty but the selection of the explanation that most adequately accounts for the evidence. The methodological framework for this is known as **Inference to the Best Explanation (IBE)**, or sometimes "abduction," a concept developed by philosopher C. S. Peirce and refined in contemporary philosophy of science and history (see Gilbert Harman, *The Inference to the Best Explanation*, 1965; Peter Lipton, *Inference to the Best Explanation*, 2nd ed., 2004).

In applying IBE, historians weigh competing hypotheses according to certain criteria. The hypothesis that best meets these criteria is the one that should be judged as providing the most rational explanation of the facts. Following standard formulations (e.g., C. Behan McCullagh, *Justifying Historical Descriptions*, 1984), six criteria are especially relevant:

1. Explanatory Scope

The best explanation accounts for *more* of the relevant evidence than its rivals. A hypothesis that can explain all of the most important minimal facts—Jesus' self-understanding, crucifixion, burial, empty tomb, post-mortem appearances, and the conversions of James and Paul—has greater scope than one that explains only a few.

2. Explanatory Power

Explanatory power concerns how well a hypothesis makes the evidence *probable*. It is not enough simply to "cover" the facts; the hypothesis must make them *expected*. A

hypothesis with weak explanatory power might render the facts possible but surprising, whereas one with strong explanatory power makes them intelligible.

3. Plausibility

The best explanation will also be more plausible, meaning it coheres with what we *already* know to be true about the world. Plausibility does not necessarily mean naturalistic reductionism, but rather whether a hypothesis fits within broader, well-established background knowledge. If the Necessary Mind deduced in Part I exists, then this will also be crucial background information to consider.

4. Less Contrived

The best explanation does not rely on ad hoc assumptions *unsupported* by independent evidence. Hypotheses requiring a web of unlikely or speculative conditions are more contrived than a simple, unified hypothesis. C. Behan McCullagh emphasizes that a good historical explanation should "introduce few new suppositions, especially ones for which we have no independent evidence" (*Justifying Historical Descriptions*, p. 19).

5. Disconfirmed by Fewer Accepted Beliefs

An adequate explanation should not conflict with well-established background knowledge or other accepted facts.

6. Comparative Superiority

Finally, the best explanation is the one that satisfies criteria (1) through (5) to such a superior degree that there is little chance a rival hypothesis will overtake it upon further scrutiny. In other words, the best explanation does not merely edge out its competitors in one category, but consistently outperforms them *across* the board.

Inference to the Best Explanation (IBE) provides the structured methodology by which historians compare naturalistic hypotheses (hallucination, conspiracy, displacement, swoon) against the Resurrection Hypothesis. The criteria ensure that we are not simply leaping to conclusions out of prior commitments, but weighing explanations on their historical merits. Let us begin.

The Conspiracy Hypothesis

The Conspiracy Hypothesis is one of the earliest and most intuitive naturalistic explanations of the resurrection. In its classic form, it suggests that Jesus' followers deliberately deceived others: they stole his body from the tomb and fabricated stories of post-mortem appearances. According to this hypothesis, the empty tomb was not the result of divine intervention, but of theft; the resurrection appearances were not genuine experiences, but lies told by conspirators; and the disciples' sudden proclamation that "God has raised Jesus from the dead" was the result of intentional fraud.

This theory is not a modern invention. It first appears in antiquity. Matthew records that the Jewish authorities circulated the story that the disciples stole Jesus' body while the guards slept (Matthew 28:11–15). In the eighteenth century, Enlightenment thinkers such as Hermann Samuel Reimarus revived the idea, suggesting that the disciples invented the resurrection to continue Jesus' movement. For some deists, this theory was attractive because it preserved a naturalistic worldview while still acknowledging Christianity's historical impact. But despite its longevity, the Conspiracy Hypothesis is today universally abandoned by professional historians. The reason is clear: when examined against rigorous standards of historical reasoning—in particular, the six criteria of Inference to the Best Explanation (IBE)—the theory collapses.

1. Explanatory Scope

On the surface, the conspiracy hypothesis seems to have broad explanatory scope. It touches on each of the minimal facts: the empty tomb (the disciples stole the body), the resurrection appearances (the disciples lied about seeing Jesus), and the origin of the disciples' belief (a fraud perpetrated on the public). In this respect, it appears at first to be a simple, unified hypothesis.

However, closer inspection reveals its limitations. First, the diversity and distribution of the resurrection appearances are not adequately covered. Paul records that Jesus appeared to individuals (Peter, James, Paul), small groups (the Twelve and other pockets of apostles), and even to more than five hundred people at once (1 Corinthians 15:3–8). These experiences occurred in different settings, times, and circumstances. To explain this through conspiracy requires supposing that the disciples coordinated an elaborate web of lies across varied contexts, maintaining consistency under scrutiny from opponents, and persuading converts like James and Paul—both originally skeptics. Such a scope is not covered and is implausibly wide for a coordinated deception.

Second, the conspiracy theory fails to account for the transformation of the disciples themselves. The minimal facts establish that the earliest disciples sincerely believed that God had raised Jesus from the dead. They preached this conviction openly, even in Jerusalem, where hostile witnesses could challenge them, and they were willing to suffer persecution and death rather than recant. As the Jewish scholar Pinchas Lapide famously remarked, *"If the defeated and depressed group of disciples overnight could change into a victorious movement of faith, based only on deception or autosuggestion, then that would be a much greater miracle than the resurrection itself."* (Lapide, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A Jewish Perspective*, 1983). Thus, while the conspiracy theory seems at first to cover the

evidence, in reality it fails to account adequately for its breadth and depth.

2. Explanatory Power

Explanatory power asks not only whether a hypothesis covers the evidence, but whether it makes the evidence probable. Here the conspiracy theory falters even more.

Consider the empty tomb. If the disciples had stolen Jesus' body, why would they invent a story in which *women* are the first witnesses? In the patriarchal culture of first-century Judaism, women's testimony was considered unreliable. Josephus explicitly states, *"Let not the testimony of women be admitted, on account of the levity and boldness of their sex"* (*Antiquities* 4.219). No such regulation is to be found in the Pentateuch but is rather a reflection of the patriarchal society of first-century Judaism. Second, women occupied a low rung on the Jewish social ladder. Compared to men, women were second-class citizens. Consider these rabbinical texts: "Sooner let the words of the Law be burnt than delivered to women!" (Sotah 19a) and again: "Happy is he whose children are male, but unhappy is he whose children are female!" (Kiddushin 82b). The daily prayer of every Jewish man included the benediction "Blessed are you, Lord our God, ruler of the universe, who has not created me a woman" (Berachos 60b). If men were fabricating the story, the inclusion of women—especially as the primary witnesses to the empty tomb—makes no sense at all. Far from strengthening the tale, it weakened it in the eyes of their contemporaries. By contrast, the presence of women witnesses makes perfect sense if the account reflects genuine memory.

Furthermore, the simplicity of the empty tomb narratives undermines the conspiracy theory. If the disciples were fabricating a story, why are the resurrection accounts (especially Mark's) so restrained? Later apocryphal gospels, such as the *Gospel of Peter*, embellish the resurrection with fantastic details: the stone rolls away by

itself, Jesus emerges from the tomb as a cosmic giant, flanked by angels, with a talking cross announcing the miracle, all witnessed by a multitude of spectators! Mark's Gospel, by contrast, is strikingly austere. It contains no description of Jesus emerging from the tomb, no triumphant scene of vindication, only the stark announcement of the empty tomb. Neither is the dispute with non-believing Jews well explained. Why isn't Matthew's guard already there in Mark's story? Even in Matthew's story the guard is set too late: the body could have been already stolen before the guard arrived on Saturday morning, so that they would have been guarding, unbeknownst to them, an empty tomb! For a fail-safe alibi against theft of the body, see once more the forged Gospel of Peter, where the guard (explicitly identified as Roman) is set immediately upon interment of the corpse.

The appearance stories present similar problems. A fabricator would likely have described Jesus' appearances in terms of Old Testament theophanies or visions of eschatological resurrection (e.g., Dan. 12:2). But then Christ should appear to the disciples in overwhelming glory. And why not a description of the resurrection itself? If the disciples were inventing all this, why not have Jesus appear to Caiaphas, Pilate, or the villains of the Sanhedrin—just as Jesus had *said*? Then *they* could be branded as the real liars for claiming that Jesus hadn't appeared to them!

Most devastating is the conspiracy theory's inability to account for the disciples' sincere belief. As Bart Ehrman, no apologist, concedes: *"It is a historical fact that some of Jesus' followers came to believe that he had been raised from the dead soon after his execution."* (*How Jesus Became God*, 2014, p. 182). A hypothesis that reduces this to conscious lying robs the evidence of its explanatory power. People may die for what they mistakenly believe to be true; they do not willingly die for what they know to be false. The idea that ordinary men and women would suddenly become conspirators and liars who would *willingly* be killed for their deliberate fabrications, without

even a *single* recorded recantation in history, is extremely improbable. As William Paley said,

> "Would men in such circumstances pretend to have seen what they never saw; assert facts which they had not knowledge of, go about lying to teach virtue; and, though not only convinced of Christ's being an imposter, but having seen the success of his imposture in his crucifixion, yet persist in carrying on; and so persist, as to bring upon themselves, for nothing, and with full knowledge of the consequence, enmity and hatred, danger and death?"[47]

The question is merely rhetorical, for the absurdity of the hypothesis of deceit is all too clear. The explanatory power of the conspiracy hypothesis is therefore minimal.

3. Plausibility

The Achilles' heel of the conspiracy hypothesis is its implausibility. It is historically anachronistic, projecting later Christian categories back onto the disciples as if they could have conceived of inventing such a story. But in first-century Judaism, the idea of a crucified and resurrected Messiah was unthinkable.

First, no Jew expected the Messiah to die, let alone to be executed by pagans as a criminal. The Messiah was expected to establish David's throne, defeat Israel's enemies, and restore righteousness. A crucified messiah was, in Jewish eyes, a failed messiah. As N. T. Wright puts it, *"If your favorite Messiah got himself crucified, you had basically two choices: give up the movement, or get yourself a new Messiah."* (*The Resurrection of the Son of*

[47] William Paley, A View of the Evidences of Christianity, 2 vols., 5th ed. (London: R. Faulder, 1796; repr. ed.: Westmead, England: Gregg, 1970), 1:327-28.

God, 2003, p. 110). Inventing a story of resurrection was not one of the options.

Second, Jewish resurrection belief differed radically from the Christian proclamation. In Judaism, resurrection was collective, occurring at the end of the world, not an isolated event in history. This is why the disciples were perplexed when Jesus spoke of rising again (Mark 9:9–11). They thought he meant the general resurrection at the end of time. Nowhere in Jewish expectation was there a belief that the Messiah alone would be raised in the middle of history. Thus, the disciples had neither the conceptual framework nor the theological motivation to invent a resurrection story.

Some skeptics have suggested that pagan myths of dying and rising gods provided inspiration. But this idea, popular in the late nineteenth century, has been thoroughly discredited. Scholars such as T. N. D. Mettinger (*The Riddle of Resurrection*, 2001) and Jonathan Z. Smith (*Drudgery Divine*, 1990) have demonstrated that alleged parallels collapse upon scrutiny. Most so-called "resurrections" in pagan mythology are not resurrections at all: they are either seasonal cycles (e.g., Tammuz, Osiris), heavenly translations (e.g., Hercules, Romulus), or symbolic myths of fertility. As Mettinger concludes: *"There is, as far as I am aware, no prima facie evidence that the death and resurrection of Jesus is a mythological construct, drawing on the myths and rites of the dying and rising gods of the surrounding world."* (Mettinger, p. 221). Moreover, Jews regarded such pagan cults as abhorrent (cf. Ezekiel 8:14–15). The disciples are therefore highly unlikely to have borrowed from them.

Thus, the conspiracy hypothesis fails the plausibility test. It requires us to believe that first-century Jews, who had no concept of an isolated resurrection of a messiah in the middle of history, invented a story utterly foreign to their worldview and unlikely to persuade their peers.

4. Less Contrived

The conspiracy hypothesis is highly contrived. It postulates motives, intentions, and coordinated actions of the disciples for which we have no evidence. Why would a group of fearful men, demoralized by their leader's humiliating death, suddenly conspire to proclaim a hoax? What benefit would they gain? They received no wealth, no power, and no honor—only persecution, imprisonment, and martyrdom. To suppose they devised such a plot, and maintained it without a single known defector, is to multiply assumptions without warrant.

The theory also requires constant patching. How do we explain the conversion of James, who was initially skeptical, or of Paul, an enemy of the church? Did the conspirators recruit them into the lie? Did Paul, who had persecuted Christians, suddenly embrace their fraud? Each objection forces new layers of supposition. As C. Behan McCullagh has shown, hypotheses that require numerous ad hoc additions to survive criticism are historically weak (*Justifying Historical Descriptions*, 1984, p. 19). By contrast, the resurrection hypothesis explains the data without contrivance.

5. Disconfirmed by Accepted Beliefs

The conspiracy theory is disconfirmed by several well-established background beliefs. First, it conflicts with the consensus that the disciples sincerely believed Jesus had risen. Even skeptics like Gerd Lüdemann affirm: *"It may be taken as historically certain that Peter and the disciples had experiences after Jesus' death in which Jesus appeared to them as the risen Christ."* (*What Really Happened to Jesus?*, 1995, p. 38). Second, it contradicts our knowledge of human psychology: large-scale conspiracies, especially those under persecution, tend to unravel quickly. Yet the resurrection proclamation endured, unshaken, for decades. Third, it clashes with Jewish messianic expectations, which

gave no conceptual space for a fabricated resurrection claim.

6. Comparative Superiority

Finally, the conspiracy theory is not comparatively superior to rival hypotheses. It fails in scope, power, plausibility, and parsimony. Even other naturalistic explanations, such as the hallucination hypothesis, at least take seriously the disciples' sincerity. The conspiracy theory, by contrast, requires us to believe that Christianity was launched by deliberate fraud—an idea that no serious historian today defends. As Craig notes, *"No scholar would defend the Conspiracy Hypothesis today. The only place you read about such things is in the popular, sensationalist press or in former propaganda from behind the Iron Curtain."* (*Reasonable Faith*, 2008, p. 373). Its abandonment is itself evidence of its inadequacy.

The Apparent Death (or "Swoon") Hypothesis

Another naturalistic attempt to explain away the resurrection is the Apparent Death Hypothesis, sometimes called the "Swoon Theory." This proposal suggests that Jesus did not actually die on the cross but merely lapsed into a state of unconsciousness or near-death. Later, he revived in the tomb, escaped, and convinced his followers that he had risen from the dead. Early forms of this idea go back to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It was promoted by Enlightenment skeptics such as Karl Bahrdt and later popularized by Friedrich Schleiermacher, as well as rationalist writers who sought to preserve Jesus as a moral teacher while rejecting supernatural resurrection. In the modern era, it has resurfaced in popular, non-scholarly works such as Hugh Schonfield's *The Passover Plot* (1965). Yet among professional historians and New Testament scholars, the hypothesis has been almost entirely

abandoned. The reasons become clear when we evaluate it under the six IBE criteria.

1. Explanatory Scope

At first glance, the Apparent Death Hypothesis appears to cover the central facts. It offers a naturalistic explanation for the empty tomb (Jesus revived and left it), the post-mortem appearances (Jesus later appeared alive to his disciples), and the disciples' belief in the resurrection (they mistakenly thought he had conquered death). Like the Conspiracy Hypothesis, it therefore seems to "touch" all the relevant evidence.

But this coverage is deceptive. For one, the hypothesis comes in two forms: conspiratorial and non-conspiratorial. In the conspiratorial version, Jesus colluded with his disciples to fake his death—perhaps using drugs or trickery to appear lifeless. This version, however, is effectively a variant of the Conspiracy Hypothesis and inherits all of its weaknesses: extreme coordination, invention of motives without evidence, and implausibility in a Jewish setting.

In the non-conspiratorial version, Jesus simply survived crucifixion, was mistakenly presumed dead, and revived spontaneously in the tomb. Yet this form faces insurmountable obstacles. How could a severely wounded man, sealed inside a rock-cut tomb with a large stone across its entrance, extricate himself without help? How could he then present himself to his disciples as the triumphant conqueror of death? At best, they would have concluded that he was still alive—not that he had been resurrected to glory. As David Strauss, the nineteenth-century critic of rationalist theories, observed: *"It is impossible that a being who had been half-dead out of weakness, and who then needed immediate medical care, should have been able to give to the disciples the impression that he was the conqueror of death and the prince of life."* (*The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, 1835, p. 412). What about James and Paul? Are we really

to believe that Jesus' own brother, plus an unsympathetic enemy, were also so deeply moved by seeing a nearly dead man?

2. Explanatory Power

Explanatory power asks whether the hypothesis makes the evidence probable. Here the Apparent Death Hypothesis falters badly.

Consider the empty tomb. Even if Jesus survived the crucifixion, how did he leave the tomb? A man who had been scourged to the point of near-death, nailed to a cross, and pierced with a spear would have been in no position to roll back a heavy stone, overpower guards (if present), and walk miles to Galilee. Roman tombs were sealed with stones weighing hundreds of pounds, often requiring several men to move. The idea that a single, gravely wounded man could have accomplished this borders on the fantastic.

The post-mortem appearances are even less explicable. What would the disciples have seen? Not a radiant, glorified Lord, but a battered, bloody man in desperate need of bandages and rest. Such a sight could not have birthed the belief that Jesus had risen immortal and victorious. At most, it would have convinced them he had barely survived execution. Yet the New Testament testimony is not that the disciples believed Jesus had escaped death, but that he had defeated it—that he had been raised in glory. Strauss was right: the condition of a resuscitated, half-dead Jesus would have elicited pity, not worship.

Most critically, the hypothesis cannot explain the origin of the disciples' resurrection faith. Resurrection in Second Temple Judaism was not the *resuscitation* of a dying man but the transformation of the dead into immortal life at the end of the age. If the disciples had encountered a wounded

Jesus, they would not have concluded that the general resurrection had begun in him. They would have concluded, instead, that he had barely survived and would eventually die again. The explanatory power of the Apparent Death Hypothesis is therefore negligible.

3. Plausibility

The Apparent Death Hypothesis fails catastrophically on plausibility grounds. Roman crucifixion was designed to ensure death. Executioners were experts in their craft, responsible with their own lives for the certainty of their victims' deaths. As Martin Hengel's classic study *Crucifixion* (1977) demonstrates, crucifixion was not merely painful but medically fatal. Victims typically died from a combination of asphyxiation, hypovolemic shock, blood loss, and organ failure. Roman practice included measures to guarantee death, such as spear thrusts or leg-breaking to hasten asphyxiation. John 19:34 records that Jesus' side was pierced by a Roman soldier, producing a flow of blood and water—widely understood to indicate a ruptured pericardium or pulmonary edema. Modern medical studies (e.g., Edwards, Gabel, and Hosmer, *JAMA*, 1986) affirm that Jesus' physiological state was utterly incompatible with survival.

Historical evidence reinforces this. Josephus recounts that he once pleaded for the lives of three acquaintances who had been crucified. They were removed from their crosses while still alive and given the best medical care available. Despite this, two of the three died anyway (*Life* 75:420–21). If crucifixion victims removed early, with medical attention, usually perished, how much less plausible is it that Jesus—brutally scourged, nailed to a cross, pierced with a spear, and left without medical care—could have survived, revived in a tomb, and inspired messianic faith? The hypothesis demands what Josephus' testimony shows to be medically and historically impossible.

4. Less Contrived

The Apparent Death Hypothesis quickly becomes contrived. In its conspiratorial form, it requires us to imagine secret societies, carefully administered potions to simulate death, clandestine arrangements between Jesus' followers and members of the Sanhedrin, and other speculative machinations. All of this, however, is unsupported by any evidence in the sources. It is ad hoc reasoning of the worst kind.

Even in its non-conspiratorial form, the theory must invent an improbable sequence of events: (1) Jesus survived crucifixion; (2) he revived spontaneously in the tomb without medical aid; (3) he moved the stone and escaped; (4) he presented himself to his disciples not as a half-dead man but as the glorious conqueror of death; and (5) he then disappeared from history, leaving no further trace. Each step multiplies assumptions without support, making the hypothesis far more complex and fragile than the simple claim of resurrection.

5. Disconfirmed by Accepted Beliefs

The hypothesis is massively disconfirmed by accepted background knowledge. Medical facts about crucifixion demonstrate that survival was essentially impossible. Roman practice ensured victims were dead before burial. Moreover, the unanimous historical tradition indicates that Jesus did not continue to live among his disciples after his death. The appearances were temporary and ended; the proclamation was not "Jesus survived" but "Jesus has been raised." The hypothesis also contradicts what is accepted about the disciples' transformation. Seeing a half-dead Jesus would not have inspired bold proclamation of resurrection, still less willingness to die for it. Instead, it would have led them to keep him hidden and nurse him back to health.

6. Comparative Superiority

Finally, the Apparent Death Hypothesis fails spectacularly when compared with other explanations. It neither matches the explanatory scope of the resurrection hypothesis, nor approaches its power, nor has any plausibility given Roman execution practices. It is enormously contrived, contradicted by medical and historical evidence, and rejected even by skeptical scholars. Indeed, David Strauss—no friend of orthodoxy—was the first to show that the theory is self-defeating, because it reduces the disciples' proclamation of resurrection to a psychological impossibility. For that reason, virtually no New Testament historian today defends it. As Craig Evans remarks, *"The swoon theory is one of those dead hypotheses that simply refuses to die—outside the academy."* (*Jesus and the Ossuaries*, 2003).

The Displaced Body Hypothesis

The **Displaced Body Hypothesis** was proposed in 1922 by the Jewish historian Joseph Klausner in his classic work *Jesus of Nazareth: His Life, Times, and Teaching*. Unlike conspiracy or swoon theories, Klausner's account did not rely on deliberate deception or improbable survival. Instead, he suggested a logistical explanation: because of the lateness of the hour before the Sabbath and the proximity of his own family tomb, Joseph of Arimathea placed Jesus' body temporarily in his personal tomb. Later, he transferred the body to the criminals' common graveyard, where executed men were typically buried. The disciples, unaware of this transfer, discovered the temporary tomb empty and mistakenly inferred that Jesus had risen.

This theory was attractive to Klausner because it offered a way of explaining the empty tomb without denying Jewish

burial customs. It is also one of the very few modern Jewish attempts to deal seriously with the evidence of Jesus' resurrection. However, Klausner's hypothesis has found no enduring support among critical scholars. Today, it is largely forgotten in the academy, although it occasionally resurfaces in popular writing or internet skepticism. The reasons for its rejection become evident when it is measured against the six criteria of Inference to the Best Explanation (IBE).

1. Explanatory Scope

The most immediate problem with the Displaced Body Hypothesis is its **narrow explanatory scope**. It attempts to explain only one element of the evidence: the empty tomb. It does not address the post-mortem appearances of Jesus reported by Paul, the Gospels, and Acts, nor the origin of the disciples' radical conviction that God had raised Jesus bodily from the dead. To account for these additional facts, independent hypotheses must be added. For instance, hallucination theory might be combined with body displacement to explain the appearances, but this multiplies assumptions and diminishes explanatory economy.

Moreover, even with respect to the empty tomb, the scope is partial. The earliest Jewish/Christian polemic was not about *where* Jesus' body was, but *why* the tomb was empty. As William Lane Craig observes, *"Had Joseph displaced the body, the controversy would not have been over why the tomb was empty, but over the location of Jesus' grave."* (*Reasonable Faith*, 2008, p. 367). The hypothesis therefore narrows the scope of explanation so significantly that it cannot seriously compete.

2. Explanatory Power

Even within its narrow scope, the explanatory power of the Displaced Body Hypothesis is weak. If Joseph had moved Jesus' body, he and his servants would have known the

body's location. Once the disciples began proclaiming that Jesus had risen, it would have been easy for Joseph—or the Jewish authorities—to correct the misunderstanding. One could imagine Joseph simply pointing to the criminal graveyard, or producing evidence of the transfer. The fact that the earliest polemic against the resurrection (attested in Matthew 28:13–15) was that the disciples had stolen the body shows that the Jewish authorities accepted the tomb was empty but did not suggest Joseph had relocated it.

Some defenders of the theory suggest that by the time the disciples began preaching the resurrection, the body would have been unidentifiable. Yet this misunderstands Jewish burial customs. Executed criminals were buried immediately, and even common graves were carefully noted. A year later, Jewish families typically exhumed the bones and placed them in ossuaries, which presupposes that burial sites were remembered. As archaeologist Jodi Magness explains, *"Jewish tombs were never used casually, and even secondary burials of criminals were conducted with respect and care for the remains."* (*Stone and Dung, Oil and Spit*, 2011). Thus, the notion that Jesus' grave would have been forgotten or untraceable does not fit with Jewish practice. The early controversy was not over *locating* a missing corpse but over *explaining* an indisputably empty tomb. This fact undermines the explanatory power of Klausner's hypothesis.

3. Plausibility

The hypothesis is also implausible given what we know about Jewish burial practices. Jewish law required executed criminals to be buried on the day of their death (Deuteronomy 21:22–23; cf. Josephus, *War* 4.317). Archaeological and textual evidence suggests that Jerusalem had a designated place for the burial of criminals, likely very close to the site of execution. Craig estimates it could have been between fifty and six hundred yards away (*Assessing the New Testament Evidence for the Historicity of the Resurrection of Jesus*, 1989). If Joseph of

Arimathea intended to comply with Jewish law, he could have buried Jesus directly in the criminals' graveyard, without first using his family tomb. The idea of temporarily polluting his own family tomb and then moving the corpse later is inconsistent with Jewish burial sensibilities.

Even more, Jewish law did not even *permit* moving a body once buried, except into a family tomb. To remove Jesus from Joseph's tomb to a common graveyard would have violated halakhic regulations. As Raymond Brown notes, *"Secondary burial was permitted only to transfer remains to the family tomb; otherwise, bodies were left undisturbed."* (*The Death of the Messiah*, 1994, p. 1240). Thus, the plausibility of Joseph engaging in such an irregular act is extremely low. The simplest and most culturally congruent action would have been immediate burial in the criminals' graveyard, eliminating the need for later displacement.

4. Less Contrived

The Displaced Body Hypothesis becomes contrived when we consider its speculative assumptions. It imputes to Joseph motives and actions for which we have no evidence: that he feared Sabbath timing constraints, that he chose to pollute his own tomb rather than bury Jesus properly in the criminals' graveyard, and that he later moved the body secretly. These suppositions are not attested in any ancient source. The canonical Gospels uniformly describe Joseph as sincerely burying Jesus in his own new tomb (Mark 15:46; Matthew 27:59–60; Luke 23:53; John 19:41–42).

To preserve the theory, additional contrived conjectures must be introduced. For example, one must hypothesize that Joseph and any servants who knew of the displacement suddenly died, or that records of the graveyard were lost, so that no one could correct the disciples' supposed error. Each added conjecture makes the hypothesis increasingly ad hoc.

5. Disconfirmed by Accepted Beliefs

The hypothesis is disconfirmed by what we know of Jewish burial procedures. As noted, executed criminals were buried on the same day, often in designated cemeteries near the place of execution. Secondary removal to a family tomb was permitted, but removal to a criminals' graveyard after temporary placement in a family tomb would have violated custom. Furthermore, all early traditions agree that Joseph provided a sincere burial for Jesus in his own tomb. There is no evidence, in Jewish, Christian, or Roman sources, that Joseph later moved the body. If such an action had occurred, one would expect at least some polemical tradition to reflect it. Instead, the early Jewish polemic focused on theft, not displacement.

6. Comparative Superiority

Finally, the Displaced Body Hypothesis is not comparatively superior to its rivals. It fails to account for the full range of evidence, has weak explanatory power, is implausible in light of Jewish practice, and becomes contrived under scrutiny. It is therefore unsurprising that no contemporary scholar defends it. Even Klausner's original formulation was criticized almost immediately, and the theory has since disappeared from serious academic discussion. Today it survives only in the writings of popular-level skeptics, often without awareness of its historical and cultural implausibility.

The Wrong Tomb Hypothesis

The **Wrong Tomb Hypothesis** was first proposed in 1907 by the Cambridge scholar Kirsopp Lake in *The Historical Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus Christ*. Lake's theory was an attempt to explain the empty tomb without invoking either fraud or miracle. According to him, the

women who went to the tomb on Easter morning mistakenly went to the wrong one. In this version of events, the women, still grief-stricken and confused, wandered to an unoccupied tomb in the garden. There they encountered a caretaker who, upon seeing them, remarked something to the effect of: *"You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth. He is not here."* The women, however, misunderstood, became frightened, and fled. Later, after disciples experienced visions of the risen Christ, this misunderstood episode evolved into the full-fledged story of the discovery of Jesus' empty tomb.

Unlike other naturalistic hypotheses, Lake's proposal never gained traction in scholarship. It was almost immediately rejected by critics as implausible and inadequate, and today no serious historian defends it. The reasons for its failure become clear when we assess it under the six criteria of Inference to the Best Explanation (IBE).

1. Explanatory Scope

A good hypothesis must have broad explanatory scope, covering all the minimal facts. The Wrong Tomb Hypothesis fails this test. It attempts to explain the empty tomb, but it says nothing about the resurrection appearances, the transformation of the disciples, the conversion of skeptics like James and Paul, or the rise of the Christian movement. To deal with these other facts, additional independent hypotheses—such as hallucination theory—would need to be combined with the wrong tomb theory. This piecemeal approach lacks coherence and unity.

Even with respect to the empty tomb, the scope of the hypothesis is limited. The earliest Christian-Jewish disputes about the resurrection did not center on the claim that the disciples had gone to the wrong tomb. Rather, they assumed that Jesus' burial site was known, and the dispute was over why that site was empty (Matthew 28:13–15). If the women had simply gone to the wrong place, the controversy would have been over their mistake, and the

matter could have been settled quickly. The fact that both Christians and Jews accepted the existence of the empty tomb shows that the wrong tomb theory fails to cover the historical landscape adequately.

2. Explanatory Power

The explanatory power of the Wrong Tomb Hypothesis is exceedingly weak. For one, it does not even attempt to address the post-mortem appearances of Jesus. As with the Displaced Body Hypothesis, this leaves it without explanatory force for two of the most significant minimal facts: the experiences of individuals and groups who were convinced they had encountered the risen Jesus, and the resulting conviction of the disciples that God had raised him.

Even in regard to the empty tomb, the theory is implausible. Suppose the women mistakenly went to the wrong tomb and reported their experience to the disciples. Would this have convinced first-century Jews that Jesus had risen from the dead? Hardly. A vague report from women that a man at a tomb said, *"He is not here,"* would not have generated the radical proclamation of resurrection. First-century Jews would not conclude from an empty tomb—or from confused testimony about one—that resurrection had taken place. Resurrection, in their worldview, was not about misplaced corpses; it was about the eschatological transformation of the dead into immortality at the end of time.

Furthermore, the hypothesis collapses under the problem of verification. After their initial fright, would the women not have retraced their steps by daylight and located the correct tomb? Would not the disciples themselves—many of whom lived in Jerusalem or nearby—have gone to check the burial place? In fact, the Gospels explicitly state that women had observed where Jesus was buried (Mark 15:47), making the idea of a simple mistake less plausible. If the wrong tomb hypothesis were correct, it would have

been trivially easy for both the disciples and their Jewish opponents to verify and disprove. Instead, the historical controversy turned not on mistaken identity of the tomb but on explaining its emptiness.

3. Plausibility

The Wrong Tomb Hypothesis is implausible in light of the evidence we do possess. The Gospels state that Joseph of Arimathea buried Jesus in a new tomb cut out of rock, one near the site of crucifixion (Mark 15:42–47; John 19:41–42). The women are explicitly said to have seen where Jesus was laid (Mark 15:47), so they knew the location. The tomb was not an anonymous or common grave but one belonging to a prominent member of the Sanhedrin, whose position would have made the burial site public knowledge. Thus, it was not only the disciples but also Jewish opponents who would have been aware of its location. As Craig Keener notes: *"It is inconceivable that the earliest Christian proclamation of resurrection, made in Jerusalem itself, could have gained traction if the body's burial place was unknown or mistaken."* (*The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, 2009, p. 698).

The early character of the empty tomb tradition further undermines Lake's proposal. Mark's empty tomb narrative, which most scholars regard as pre-Markan in form, is strikingly simple and shows no signs of legendary embellishment. The lack of theological reflection—no scriptural proof-texts, no depiction of the resurrection event itself—suggests it is rooted in early, authentic memory. This early provenance makes it highly implausible that it arose out of a late legendary reinterpretation of a mistaken tomb visit.

4. Less Contrived

Lake's hypothesis is ad hoc in its selectivity. For example, he accepts the tradition that the women went to the tomb to

anoint Jesus' body but discounts the equally strong tradition that they saw where he was buried the evening before. Why accept one but not the other? Similarly, he accepts part of the caretaker's supposed message (*"He is not here"*) as authentic but dismisses the rest (*"He is risen!"*) as later Christian proclamation. Yet the entire speech belongs together as a unit. It is methodologically arbitrary to excise half of it while retaining the other half.

Moreover, Lake interprets Mark's "young man" (Mark 16:5) as a human caretaker, but the Greek term (*neaniskos*) is often used of angelic figures, and his white robe is characteristic of Jewish descriptions of angels (cf. Daniel 10:5–6; Acts 1:10). The women's fear and astonishment—another Markan motif—fits better with an angelophany than with a chance encounter with a gardener. Lake's selectivity in treating the tradition introduces unnecessary ad hoc assumptions, making the theory contrived.

5. Disconfirmed by Accepted Beliefs

The Wrong Tomb Hypothesis is contradicted by widely accepted historical facts. Chief among these is that Jesus was buried by Joseph of Arimathea, a figure unlikely to be a Christian invention given his status as a Sanhedrin member (the very body that condemned Jesus). As John A. T. Robinson argued, the burial by Joseph is "one of the earliest and best-attested traditions" (*The Human Face of God*, 1973, p. 131). If Joseph buried Jesus, then the location of the tomb was known. The hypothesis also contradicts the generally accepted early provenance of the empty tomb tradition, which rules out later legendary development. Finally, it fails to account for the polemical context: Jewish opponents did not claim the disciples went to the wrong tomb but instead acknowledged the emptiness and accused the disciples of theft. This demonstrates that the burial site was not in dispute.

6. Comparative Superiority

For a hypothesis to be judged best, it must exceed its rivals across the board. The Wrong Tomb Hypothesis fails miserably here. It has narrow scope, weak power, implausibility in light of burial traditions, contrived selectivity, and conflict with accepted background facts. It does not explain the data as well as the resurrection hypothesis, nor even as well as other failed naturalistic theories like hallucination. As a result, it gained virtually no scholarly following and was "dead almost upon arrival." Today, it survives only in occasional popular or internet discussions, not in serious academic debate.

The Hallucination Hypothesis

The **Hallucination Hypothesis** is among the most serious naturalistic attempts to explain the resurrection appearances. It was first proposed by David Friedrich Strauss in his monumental work *The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined* (1835). Strauss argued that the disciples did not actually see the risen Jesus but projected subjective visions or hallucinations of him after his death. In modern times, the hypothesis has been most prominently defended by Gerd Lüdemann, the German New Testament critic, who maintains that the resurrection appearances were psychological experiences generated by grief, guilt, and religious expectation (*What Really Happened to Jesus?*, 1995).

Because it does not involve deception or physical survival, the Hallucination Hypothesis has enjoyed more serious discussion in scholarship than theories such as conspiracy or swoon. Yet, when subjected to the rigorous criteria of Inference to the Best Explanation (IBE), it, too, proves inadequate.

1. Explanatory Scope

The explanatory scope of the Hallucination Hypothesis is narrow. First, it says nothing about the empty tomb. If Jesus' body remained in the grave, then hallucinations alone cannot explain why the tomb was found empty. To maintain the theory, one must either deny the historicity of the empty tomb altogether or conjoin another hypothesis (such as displacement or theft) to explain it. Either approach diminishes the simplicity and unity of the explanation.

Second, it does not explain the origin of the disciples' resurrection belief. Hallucinations of a deceased loved one do occur, as psychologists have documented. Studies of bereavement, such as those cited by Tony Walter in *The Eclipse of Eternity* (1996), note that widows and parents sometimes report vivid experiences of seeing or hearing the deceased. But the crucial point, as N. T. Wright stresses (*The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 2003), is that such experiences are never taken as evidence that the deceased has risen bodily from the grave. Rather, they are interpreted as signs that the person is dead and perhaps lives on in a spiritual realm. In Jewish thought, such visions would have been interpreted not as resurrection but as *assumption* into heaven or as visions of the soul in paradise. Dunn demands:

"Why did they conclude that it was Jesus *risen from the dead*?—Why not simply a vision of the dead man?—Why not visions "fleshed out" with the apparatus of apocalyptic expectation, coming on the clouds of glory and the like . . .? Why draw the astonishing conclusion that the *eschatological* resurrection had *already* taken place in the case of a *single individual* separate from and prior to the general resurrection?"[48]

[48] James W. D. G. Dunn, Jesus and the Spirit (London: SCM, 1975), 132.

As Dunn's last question indicates, the inference "he has been raised from the dead," so natural to our ears, would have been wholly unnatural to a first-century Jew. In Jewish thinking there was already a category perfectly suited to describe Peter's postulated experience: Jesus had been assumed into heaven. Allison himself admits, "If there was no reason to believe that his solid body had returned to life, no one would have thought him, against expectation, resurrected from the dead. Certainly visions of or perceived encounters with a postmortem Jesus would not by themselves, have supplied such reason."[49]

The Hebrew Bible provides examples of such assumptions: Enoch (Genesis 5:24) and Elijah (2 Kings 2:11) were taken into heaven without dying. Similarly, *The Testament of Job* (ch. 39–40) tells of two children killed in a house collapse whose bodies vanish, and their mother sees a vision of them glorified in heaven. But in all these cases, assumption into heaven is not resurrection. Resurrection meant the raising of the dead in the space-time world, not visions of them in heavenly glory. Thus, even if the disciples had hallucinated visions of Jesus, the natural Jewish interpretation would have been that he had been taken up into heaven—not that he had risen from the dead within history. The Hallucination Hypothesis therefore fails to explain the origin of the disciples' radical and unexpected claim: *"God has raised Jesus from the dead."*

2. Explanatory Power

When we turn to explanatory power, the weaknesses of the Hallucination Hypothesis become even more evident. The appearances of Jesus were not isolated or uniform experiences. They were multiple, diverse, and communal. Jesus appeared at different times, in different places, and to different groups: to individuals like Peter, to small groups like the Twelve, to larger groups like the 500 (1 Corinthians 15:3–8), and even to skeptics and enemies like

[49] Allison, Resurrecting Jesus, 324-25.

James and Paul. Positing hallucinations stretches plausibility beyond the limits of the psychological evidence. Hallucinations are by nature private, subjective experiences. They cannot be shared in the way the Gospels and Paul's letters describe. Moreover, the variety of circumstances is striking. Jesus appears indoors and outdoors, by lakeshores and in gardens, to men and women, to friends and foes, by day and by night. He speaks, eats, teaches, and commissions. To explain this range by hallucinations requires cobbling together different kinds of unrelated experiences from the psychological casebooks. But this "patchwork" approach only underlines the fact that there is nothing comparable in the psychological literature to the resurrection appearances.

For multiple individuals and groups of people, at different times, places, and circumstances, to have such oddly consistent, multimodal hallucinations (especially for something as peculiarly novel to the Jewish worldview as an *eschatological* resurrection *already* happening for *one man*), including hallucinations that somehow stretch across individuals (e.g., back-and-forth conversation, such as that on the road to Emmaus, or eating together, as is independently attested), and including skeptics and enemies (i.e., James and Paul) with no hallucinatory predisposition, is *extremely* improbable. Such an event would require a chance level of unprecedented neural synchronization bordering on scientifically impossible.

Finally, the Hallucination Hypothesis is particularly weak in explaining the conversions of James and Paul. Both were skeptics—James an unbelieving relative of Jesus (John 7:5), and Paul a persecutor of the church (Galatians 1:13). Neither was in a state of bereavement or guilt-induced longing for Jesus' return. Yet both became convinced that Jesus had appeared to them and were transformed into leaders of the early church. Hallucinations induced by grief might explain a disciple's vision, but they cannot plausibly account for sudden reversals in hostile skeptics.

3. Plausibility

Lüdemann sought to increase plausibility by offering a **psychoanalytic account** of Peter and Paul. He argued that Peter, wracked with guilt over denying Jesus, projected a hallucination of him. Paul, likewise, supposedly suffered from deep inner conflict under the Jewish Law and projected a vision of Jesus on the Damascus Road. But this approach suffers from serious flaws.

First, Lüdemann's method relies on speculative theories of depth psychology derived from Freud and Jung, schools of thought that are highly disputed and largely discredited as explanatory frameworks in modern psychology.

Second, psychoanalysis of historical figures is notoriously unreliable. As Ernst Käsemann and other historians have noted, psychobiographies of ancient figures are highly speculative, since we lack the detailed clinical data necessary for genuine psychological analysis. Even with living patients, psychoanalysis is uncertain; with ancient figures, it is virtually impossible.

Third, the data we do have do not support Lüdemann's account. Paul, far from struggling with guilt, described his pre-Christian life as blameless: *"As to righteousness under the law, I was blameless"* (Philippians 3:6). Krister Stendahl's influential essay *"The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West"* (1963) showed that Western interpreters, influenced by Martin Luther's guilt-driven theology, have mistakenly read Paul as tormented by guilt. In fact, Paul appears to have been a zealous, satisfied Pharisee until his dramatic conversion. Stendahl writes:

"Contrast Paul, a very happy and successful Jew, one who can say "As to righteousness under the Law [I was] blameless" (Phil. 3.6). That is what he says. He experiences no troubles, no problems, no qualms of conscience. He is a star pupil, the student to get the

thousand-dollar graduate scholarship in Gamaliel's Seminary… Nowhere in Paul's writings is there any indication…that psychologically Paul had some problem of conscience."[50]

In order to justify his portrait of a guilt-ridden Paul, Lüdemann is forced to interpret Romans 7 in terms of Paul's pre-Christian experience. But, as Hans Kessler observes, this interpretation is rejected by almost all commentators since the late 1920's.[51] Thus, Lüdemann's psychoanalysis of Paul is historically implausible.

Another implausibility lies in reducing all appearances to "visions" of the same kind as Paul's Damascus Road experience. Lüdemann recognizes that the Hallucination Hypothesis depends on the presupposition that what Paul saw on the Damascus Road was the same as what all the other disciples experienced: "Anyone who does not share [this] presupposition will not be able to make any sense" out of what he has to say. But this presupposition is groundless. Many of Paul's opponents denied his true apostleship, so Paul is anxious to include himself along with the other apostles who had seen Christ. John Dominic Crossan explains: "Paul *needs* in I Cor 15 to equate his own experience with that of the preceding apostles. To equate, that is, its *validity and legitimacy*, but not necessarily its mode or manner ... Paul's own entranced revelation should not be presumed to be the model for all others."[52] Paul insists in 1 Corinthians 15:8 that his appearance was the "last of all" and unusual. He includes it in the list of appearances not because it was identical but to show that he, too, had seen the risen Lord and so was an apostle. To reduce all the disciples' appearances to Paul's visionary

[50] Krister Stendahl, "Paul among Jews and Gentiles," in Paul among Jews and Gentiles (Philadelphia: Fortesss, 1976), 12-13.
[51] Hans Kessler, Sucht den Lebenden nicht bei den Toten, new ed. (Wurzburg: Echter, 1995), 423.
[52] John Dominic Crossan, Jesus: A Revolutionary Bibliography (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1994), 169.

experience is anachronistic and disregards Paul's own intention.

4. Less Contrived

The Hallucination Hypothesis is also contrived in multiple ways. It assumes, without evidence, that the disciples all fled to Galilee after Jesus' arrest, and that they were so grief-stricken as to be prone to hallucinations. It assumes Peter's guilt was so consuming that he projected an appearance. It assumes that James and Paul were psychologically primed for visions when the evidence suggests the opposite. It assumes that group hallucinations of a kind unknown in psychology occurred repeatedly in diverse contexts. Each of these assumptions is speculative and unsupported, making the hypothesis highly ad hoc.

5. Disconfirmed by Accepted Beliefs

The Hallucination Hypothesis is also disconfirmed by multiple accepted scholarly beliefs. Most scholars today affirm that Jesus was buried by Joseph of Arimathea, that his tomb was found empty by women, and that hallucinations do not produce shared group experiences. Historians generally reject psychoanalytic reconstructions of ancient figures. They also recognize that Paul did not suffer from a guilt complex and that the New Testament distinguishes between a mere vision and a resurrection appearance. For example, Acts 12:9 distinguishes Peter's vision of an angel from real events; in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul distinguishes resurrection appearances from other visionary experiences. Thus, the Hallucination Hypothesis runs counter to *multiple* well-established historical judgments.

6. Comparative Superiority

Finally, the Hallucination Hypothesis fails to exceed the Resurrection Hypothesis in fulfilling explanatory criteria. It

cannot account for the empty tomb, fails to explain the disciples' resurrection belief within their Jewish framework, cannot plausibly explain the diversity and communal nature of the appearances, relies on speculative psychoanalysis, and is contrived in its assumptions.

That said, unlike conspiracy or swoon theories, the Hallucination Hypothesis is still taken seriously in some academic circles. It remains "a live option," especially among skeptical scholars like Lüdemann and Dale Allison (who offers a more nuanced account in *Resurrecting Jesus*, 2005). But the question is not whether it is a live option, but whether it provides the **best explanation**. On the IBE criteria, it fails.

The Legend Hypothesis

The **Legend Hypothesis** contends that belief in Jesus' resurrection was not the result of deliberate deceit (as in the Conspiracy Hypothesis), or of psychological phenomena (as in the Hallucination Hypothesis), or of some naturalistic occurrence mistaken for resurrection (as in the Swoon or Wrong Tomb Hypotheses). Rather, it claims that the resurrection stories are legendary developments that gradually grew in the early Christian community. In this view, Jesus may have lived and died by crucifixion, but the accounts of an empty tomb and post-mortem appearances are mythological accretions, embellishments layered upon the historical memory of Jesus. This idea has roots in the radical skepticism of 19th-century scholars such as Bruno Bauer, but today it is sometimes associated with fringe figures like John Dominic Crossan (who saw the appearances as "parables" of faith rather than literal events) or certain mythicists who deny Jesus' historicity altogether (though this extreme view has virtually no scholarly defenders).

At first glance, the Legend Hypothesis may seem attractive to skeptics, since legendary development is a known feature of religious literature. Yet when assessed by the criteria of Inference to the Best Explanation, the theory quickly proves inadequate.

1. Explanatory Scope

The Legend Hypothesis suffers from critically narrow scope. It must dismiss or explain away **nearly all of the minimal facts** that contemporary scholarship recognizes:

- The crucifixion and honorable burial by Joseph of Arimathea.
- The discovery of the empty tomb by women.
- The multiple, early post-mortem appearance traditions.
- The transformation of the disciples and their willingness to suffer and die for their belief.
- The sudden conversions of skeptics like James and Paul.

Legends take time to develop, but the traditions surrounding the resurrection emerged **within just a few years** of Jesus' death. Paul's testimony in 1 Corinthians 15:3–8 is universally recognized as preserving an early creedal formula dating to within 2–5 years after the crucifixion (James Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 2003, pp. 855–856). Similarly, Rudolf Pesch, a German specialist in Mark, dated the Passion source Mark used to the mid-30s AD—just a handful of years after the events themselves. This means that the bedrock traditions (burial, empty tomb, appearances) were circulating while eyewitnesses were still alive. Legends simply do not emerge with such speed, especially in the presence of hostile witnesses (both Jewish and Roman) who could have contradicted them.

Comparatively, the biographies of Alexander the Great were not written until centuries after his death (by Arrian

and Plutarch), and it is only after *those* centuries that truly legendary material appears. As A. N. Sherwin-White noted, for the Gospels to have become pure legend in such a short span "the rate of legendary accumulation would have to be unbelievable" (*Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament*, 1963, p. 190). Thus, the scope of the Legend Hypothesis fails to cover the sheer early and multiple attestations to the resurrection. As Professor Sherwin-White said,

"For Acts the confirmation of historicity is overwhelming. Any attempt to reject its basic historicity, even in matters of detail, must now appear absurd. Roman historians have long taken it for granted. In what other field of ancient history would a legend hypothesis be even entertained, given the proximity of the evidence to the events?"[53]

2. Explanatory Power

The explanatory power of the Legend Hypothesis is weak. Even if some legendary development occurred over decades (as in later apocryphal gospels), this cannot explain the earliest resurrection traditions embedded in Paul's letters. Paul's testimony—pre-dating the Gospels—attests to specific individuals (Peter, James), groups (the Twelve), and even a crowd of "over 500" who claimed to have seen Jesus alive (and for whom Paul rhetorically invites scrutiny). The resurrection proclamation was not a late myth but the central, public claim of the church from its *inception.* Martin Hengel, a German historian of early Christianity from the University of Tübingen, boldly declares:

"The time span between the death of Jesus and the writing of the Gospels is too short for a process of

[53] Sherwin-White, A.N. Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament (1963), p. 189

mythologization of any substantial kind to have taken place. The idea that such a massive legendary development could occur in less than a generation is historically impossible."[54]

Moreover, the Legend Hypothesis cannot explain the disciples' sincere conviction that Jesus was risen. Legends may inspire faith, but they do not generate the kind of radical transformation that drove the earliest disciples to risk martyrdom. Nor does the hypothesis explain why the disciples, from within a Jewish apocalyptic worldview, would come to the unprecedented belief that the Messiah—killed by pagans—had been bodily raised within history. Legends typically conform to cultural expectations; the resurrection belief was a sharp departure from them.

Finally, the Legend Hypothesis fares poorly against the empty tomb. If the empty tomb were a late invention, it is strange that the Gospels place women (whose testimony carried little weight in first-century Judaism) as the discoverers. Legendary development would likely have produced male disciples as witnesses. The criterion of embarrassment therefore strongly supports historicity. The very nature of the Gospels and Pauline Epistles, at least for the minimal historical facts, resists legendary reduction. As C.S. Lewis, formerly an atheist, so eloquently stated,

"First then, whatever these men may be as Biblical critics, I distrust them as critics. They seem to me to lack literary judgement, to be imperceptive about the very quality of the texts they are reading. It sounds a strange charge to bring against men who have been steeped in those books all their lives. But that might be just the trouble. A man who has spent his youth and manhood in the minute study of New Testament texts and of other people's studies of them, whose

[54] Hengel, Martin. The Four Gospels and the One Gospel of Jesus Christ (2000), p. 6

literary experience of those texts lacks any standard of comparison such as can only grow from a wide and deep and genial experience of literature in general, is, I should think, very likely to miss the obvious thing about them. If he tells me that something in a Gospel is legend or romance, I want to know how many legends and romances he has read, how well his palate is trained in detecting them by the flavour; not how many years he has spent on that Gospel … I have been reading poems, romances, vision-literature, legends, myths all my life. I know what they are like. I know that not one of them is like this. Of this text there are only two possible views. Either this is reportage – though it may no doubt contain errors – pretty close up to the facts; nearly as close as Boswell. Or else, some unknown writer in the second century, without known predecessors, or successors, suddenly anticipated the whole technique of modern, novelistic, realistic narrative. If it is untrue, it must be narrative of that kind. The reader who doesn't see this has simply not learned to read."[55]

3. Plausibility

For the Legend Hypothesis to be plausible, one would have to posit that a high density of legendary development occurred in a uniquely compressed period of time. But this is contrary to what we know about how legends form. In Greco-Roman history, generations typically pass before legend overtakes history, allowing eyewitnesses to die off. Yet in the case of Jesus, the core resurrection proclamation was in circulation almost immediately. As Larry Hurtado has shown, the worship of Jesus as divine exploded onto the scene within a few short years after his death (*Lord*

[55] Lewis, C.S. Fern-Seed and Elephants (1959), p. 14

Jesus Christ, 2003). This is not the gradual trajectory of legend but the sudden eruption of conviction.

Additionally, the hypothesis is implausible given the external checks. The resurrection was proclaimed in Jerusalem, the very city where Jesus was crucified and buried. If the accounts were legendary fabrications, Jewish leaders could have produced the corpse or pointed to the known burial site. Instead, the polemic was over why the tomb was empty, not over whether it was.

4. Less Contrived

The Legend Hypothesis becomes contrived because it must selectively accept or reject evidence based on prior commitment to naturalism. It accepts the crucifixion (since it is multiply attested and historically secure) but denies the empty tomb, even though that, too, enjoys multiple early attestations. It accepts that disciples came to believe something radical happened but denies the explanatory power of appearances, despite their early and diverse testimony. It also tends to downplay or dismiss embarrassing details (women as witnesses, the slow belief of the disciples, the initial doubt of some). The ad hoc nature of this selectivity renders the hypothesis contrived.

5. Disconfirmed by Accepted Beliefs

The Legend Hypothesis is disconfirmed by widely accepted scholarly conclusions:

- **Early Creeds**: The 1 Corinthians 15 creed is early, not late.
- **Burial by Joseph**: This tradition is multiply attested and highly probable.
- **Empty Tomb**: The early polemics and female witnesses make it historically credible.

- **Appearance Traditions**: These are too early, widespread, and communal to be reduced to late legends.

The consensus in contemporary New Testament criticism is that the resurrection belief was present from the very beginning of the movement, not something that grew up generations later.

6. Comparative Superiority

Finally, the Legend Hypothesis does not surpass other hypotheses in explanatory adequacy. It has narrow scope, weak power, low plausibility, contrived selectivity, and conflicts with well-established facts.

The Twin-Brother / Impersonator Hypothesis

The **Twin-Brother or Impersonator Hypothesis** proposes that Jesus had an unknown identical twin (or at least someone who closely resembled him), who either intentionally or accidentally impersonated him after the crucifixion, thereby giving rise to the belief that he had risen from the dead. Variants of this hypothesis can be found as far back as some heterodox Gnostic traditions, such as the Acts of Thomas, which depicts the apostle Thomas ("Didymus," meaning "twin") as Jesus' twin brother. In modern times, it occasionally resurfaces in skeptical or sensationalist writing, though almost no contemporary scholars give it serious consideration.

Despite its outlandishness, the hypothesis is worth addressing because it purports to explain the **appearances** of Jesus after his death without appealing to either hallucination or miracle. Yet when measured against the criteria of Inference to the Best Explanation, it is quickly shown to be deeply inadequate.

1. Explanatory Scope

On the surface, the Twin-Brother Hypothesis attempts to explain at least one element of the data: the post-mortem appearances. If Jesus had a twin or lookalike, that person could conceivably have presented himself to the disciples, leading them to believe Jesus had risen. However, the scope of this explanation is extremely limited.

First, it says nothing about the empty tomb. The twin would not have been buried, nor could his existence explain why Jesus' actual tomb was found empty. One must conjoin another independent hypothesis (conspiracy, displaced body, wrong tomb) to explain the empty tomb, multiplying assumptions.

Second, it fails to explain the origin of the disciples' resurrection belief in the Jewish context. A twin appearing after the crucifixion would not naturally lead to the conclusion that Jesus had risen bodily from the dead. At most, it would raise suspicions of mistaken identity or deception. Resurrection in the Jewish worldview was not about doppelgängers—it was about the transformation of the dead. Thus, the scope of this hypothesis is confined narrowly to appearances and fails to cover the broader range of minimal facts.

2. Explanatory Power

The explanatory power of the hypothesis is also very weak. The appearances were not fleeting glimpses of a familiar figure at a distance, as though easily mistaken. They involved extended interactions: Jesus teaching, eating, inviting Thomas to touch his wounds (John 20:27), cooking fish by the Sea of Galilee (John 21:12–13), and appearing to large groups in varied circumstances (1 Corinthians 15:6). These are not scenarios in which a mere lookalike could plausibly deceive.

Furthermore, many of the appearances occurred to disciples who had lived with Jesus for years. They knew his voice, his mannerisms, his habits, his teaching style. It stretches credulity to suppose that such intimate acquaintances could be fooled repeatedly by an impostor. One need not even mention James, Jesus' *own brother!* For Jesus' own brother, despite being a skeptic, to be so thoroughly and easily deceived (even to the point of martyrdom) by an impersonator is extremely improbable.

3. Plausibility

The plausibility of the hypothesis is virtually nil. There is no historical evidence that Jesus had a twin brother. While "Didymus" (meaning "twin") is indeed a name associated with the apostle Thomas, there is no reason to connect this with Jesus himself. The canonical Gospels, the Pauline letters, and non-Christian sources all make no mention of a twin. On the contrary, Jesus' family is consistently presented in the tradition: his mother Mary, his brothers James, Joses, Judas, and Simon (Mark 6:3). Had there been a twin, it would have been widely known and could not have been kept secret.

The hypothesis also presupposes an extraordinary deception. The supposed twin would have had to appear at exactly the right time and place after Jesus' crucifixion, persuade multiple groups of people over a span of forty days, and then vanish from history without leaving a trace. Such a conspiracy requires a host of ad hoc assumptions with no independent evidence.

4. Less Contrived

The contrived nature of the Twin-Brother Hypothesis is evident in its speculative fabrications. It invents a twin or impersonator for whom there is not a shred of historical evidence. It then posits that this individual decided to deceive or unintentionally convinced others of resurrection,

yet left no trace in any tradition. To salvage the hypothesis, one must multiply conjectures—why did the twin remain hidden throughout Jesus' ministry? What motivated him to impersonate his crucified brother? How did he replicate the marks of crucifixion (hands, feet, and side) so convincingly that Thomas was persuaded? Each step requires a fresh ad hoc supposition. As a result, the theory is vastly more contrived than its alternatives.

5. Disconfirmed by Accepted Beliefs

The hypothesis is disconfirmed by several accepted scholarly judgments:

- **Jesus' family**: His siblings are well attested. None is described as a twin, nor is any twin mentioned in early polemics.
- **The empty tomb**: The tradition is early and robust; an impersonator cannot explain it.
- **The diversity of appearances**: These include close physical and personal interactions that a mere lookalike could not provide.
- **The transformation of skeptics**: James and Paul would not be deceived by impersonation.

Thus, the hypothesis runs contrary to well-established historical facts.

6. Comparative Superiority

Finally, the Twin-Brother Hypothesis does not surpass its rivals across the explanatory criteria. It has extremely limited scope, poor explanatory power, virtually no plausibility, is highly contrived, and contradicts accepted facts. Compared even to the weak hallucination hypothesis, the twin theory fares worse, since it relies on inventing a figure for which there is no evidence.

The "Alien from Outer Space" Hypothesis

The **Alien Hypothesis** suggests that what the disciples experienced after Jesus' crucifixion was not the resurrection of a dead man, but rather the intervention of advanced extraterrestrial beings. According to this theory, aliens either reanimated Jesus' body, cloned him, or projected illusions of him to his followers. Some versions even suggest that Jesus himself was an alien, and that his resurrection appearances were merely the deployment of superior technology beyond human understanding. While popularized in fringe "ancient astronaut" circles (e.g., Erich von Däniken's *Chariots of the Gods?*, 1968, though he never directly advanced this claim about Jesus), no serious historian or New Testament scholar advocates such a hypothesis.

Nevertheless, evaluating this theory is instructive, because it reveals how important methodological controls are in historical inquiry. When subjected to the criteria of Inference to the Best Explanation (IBE), the Alien Hypothesis proves not only implausible but fundamentally unhistorical.

1. Explanatory Scope

On a superficial level, the Alien Hypothesis might appear to cover much of the evidence. An advanced extraterrestrial race could (in principle) explain the empty tomb (they removed or reanimated the body), the post-mortem appearances (through technological projection or physical intervention), the disciples' belief (they were convinced by what they saw), and even the conversions of skeptics (since they too experienced these phenomena).

But this breadth is only apparent. The hypothesis does not genuinely engage with the data as historians understand it. Historical explanation requires situating events within the known context of the first-century Mediterranean world.

Postulating alien involvement imports an entirely foreign category into the explanatory field, without any historical or even philosophical justification. As a result, it is a scope achieved only by speculative imposition, not by explanatory adequacy.

2. Explanatory Power

Explanatory power measures how well a hypothesis makes the evidence probable. Here the Alien Hypothesis fares disastrously.

The hypothesis does not make the empty tomb probable; it merely asserts that aliens could have removed the body. But this move is indistinguishable from saying, "something unknown did it." Nor does it explain the appearances: why would extraterrestrials choose to appear to Peter, James, Paul, and 500 disciples in the guise of the crucified and risen Jesus? Why would they reproduce the marks of crucifixion wounds? Why would they stage such encounters in exactly the manner consistent with Jewish resurrection expectation (bodily transformation within history), rather than with any conceivable alien purpose?

In fact, the hypothesis lacks any explanatory *specificity*. It does not make the particular shape of the evidence probable—it simply accommodates it by unfalsifiable speculation.

3. Plausibility

The plausibility of the Alien Hypothesis is virtually zero. Plausibility depends on coherence with background knowledge. Historical reconstructions must work within the framework of what is known from first-century Judaism, Greco-Roman history, and human experience. The Alien Hypothesis instead appeals to highly speculative assumptions about extraterrestrial civilizations and their

intervention in human history, for which we have no independent evidence.

Moreover, the disciples themselves would not have interpreted such experiences as alien encounters. First-century Jews had no conceptual framework for "extraterrestrials." Their interpretive categories were resurrection, visions, angelic visitations, or divine acts. Thus, even if one postulated alien activity, it would not explain why the disciples specifically proclaimed *resurrection* in the Jewish sense, rather than some other interpretation.

4. Less Contrived

This hypothesis is the epitome of being contrived. It requires inventing an entirely unsubstantiated scenario:

- Aliens not only exist, but were present in first-century Judea.
- They either possessed or developed motives to intervene in Jewish messianic expectations.
- They deliberately chose Jesus as their subject, orchestrating his resurrection appearances.
- They then departed, leaving no other trace in the historical record.

Each of these steps introduces massive speculative assumptions with no evidence. By contrast, the Resurrection Hypothesis is far less contrived, since it arises naturally within the theological and historical matrix of early Christianity.

5. Disconfirmed by Accepted Beliefs

The Alien Hypothesis is disconfirmed by several accepted beliefs:

- **Historical method**: Historians are restricted to explanations grounded in the cultural framework of the period. Postulating novel aliens violates this principle by introducing speculative, untestable entities that have no independent historical or philosophical warrant.
- **Theological shape of the proclamation**: The disciples proclaimed that God—the God of Israel—had raised Jesus. They did not appeal to strange beings from the stars.

Thus, the Alien Hypothesis is fundamentally anachronistic, reading modern science-fiction categories into an ancient context.

6. Comparative Superiority

Finally, the Alien Hypothesis does not surpass its rivals in explanatory adequacy. It has superficial scope but weak explanatory power, is implausible, wildly contrived, and contradicted by what we know about history and Jewish thought.

The Resurrection Hypothesis

Having seen the repeated failures of the naturalistic hypotheses—their narrow explanatory scope, their weak explanatory power, their implausibility in historical context, their contrived assumptions, and their frequent contradiction of well-established facts—we arrive at the central question: *Does the Resurrection Hypothesis fare any better?* Can the hypothesis that "God raised Jesus from the dead" withstand the same rigorous criteria? When carefully examined, the Resurrection Hypothesis not only surpasses all rivals, but uniquely provides a unified, powerful, and contextually fitting account of the historical evidence.

1. Explanatory Scope

The Resurrection Hypothesis covers the full breadth of the data. Unlike the Hallucination Hypothesis, which fails to explain the empty tomb, or the Displaced Body Hypothesis, which does not address the post-mortem appearances, the Resurrection Hypothesis simultaneously accounts for **all of the central facts**:

- The **empty tomb**, discovered by women on the first day of the week.
- The **post-mortem appearances** to individuals, groups, and skeptics.
- The **origin and sudden rise of the disciples' belief** in Jesus' resurrection, despite every prior expectation to the contrary, *plus* the conversions of James and Paul.

Rival hypotheses at best explain only one strand of the evidence and usually at the cost of ignoring or minimizing others. The Resurrection Hypothesis, by contrast, has a scope wide enough to encompass the entire evidential field without fragmentation.

2. Explanatory Power

Perhaps the greatest strength of the Resurrection Hypothesis lies in its explanatory power—its ability to render the evidence not merely accommodated but *probable*. On this hypothesis, it is exactly what we would expect to find:

- If God raised Jesus, the tomb would be empty, as reported.
- If God raised Jesus, his followers would indeed experience him alive, teaching and interacting with them.
- If God raised Jesus, the disciples would be transformed from despairing fugitives into bold proclaimers, willing to die for their conviction.
- If God raised Jesus, it is wholly intelligible why skeptics like James and enemies like Paul would be confronted and converted.

By contrast, on the Conspiracy Hypothesis, the evidence becomes highly improbable, for liars do not choose to endure persecution and death for what they know to be false. On the Swoon Hypothesis, it becomes nearly impossible, since a half-dead, mangled man could not inspire worship as the glorified Lord of life. On the Hallucination Hypothesis, the probability collapses, since hallucinations do not appear to multiple groups, skeptics, and enemies across diverse times and places. But given the Resurrection Hypothesis, all these facts fall neatly into place.

3. Plausibility

The plausibility of the Resurrection Hypothesis must be considered in its **historical and philosophical context**. Historically, Jesus was not an ordinary individual. He made unparalleled personal claims—to forgive sins, to inaugurate God's kingdom, to be the unique Son of the Father—and

demonstrated an authority that astonished both followers and opponents. His crucifixion as "King of the Jews" was the result of these radical messianic claims. In this context, the hypothesis that God would vindicate Jesus uniquely by raising him from the dead is deeply congruent with the narrative.

Philosophically, the plausibility grows exponentially once the existence of God is admitted. If God exists—the necessary, personal, and transcendent mind who created and sustains the universe—then the raising of Jesus is no longer an arbitrary violation of natural law, but a unique act of divine self-disclosure. In fact, if the philosophical argument presented in Part I is correct, then there can be virtually no excuse. As Richard Swinburne has argued (*The Resurrection of God Incarnate*, 2003), if there is a God who has reason to reveal himself decisively to humanity, and if Jesus made the kind of unparalleled personal claims that he did, then it is eminently plausible that God would vindicate those claims through resurrection. Thus, in its true context, the Resurrection Hypothesis is not only possible but fitting.

4. Less Contrived

Some critics allege that the Resurrection Hypothesis is contrived—that invoking God is simply a convenient way of halting further inquiry. But contrivedness, properly defined, refers to the need for multiple ad hoc suppositions unsupported by independent evidence. By this definition, the Resurrection Hypothesis is strikingly *uncontrived*. It requires only a single supposition: that God exists. And for those who already have independent reasons to affirm God's existence—from cosmological, teleological, moral, or ontological arguments—this is not a new supposition at all.

By contrast, rival hypotheses multiply contrived assumptions. The Conspiracy Hypothesis requires us to suppose the disciples became liars and conspirators of

extraordinary resilience. The Swoon Hypothesis requires us to believe Roman executioners failed in their duty, and that a half-dead victim could move a stone and inspire worship. The Hallucination Hypothesis requires us to posit a range of unprecedented psychological phenomena, including group hallucinations and the conversion of skeptics and enemies. The Legend Hypothesis requires an impossibly accelerated rate of legendary development within the lifetime of eyewitnesses. Each of these imports multiple ad hoc suppositions. The Resurrection Hypothesis, by contrast, is parsimonious.

It should also be noted that in the philosophy of science, the introduction of new entities (quarks, neutrinos, black holes) is not considered contrived when it provides superior explanatory power. Similarly, positing God's act of resurrection is not contrived when it naturally fits the historical and theological context of Jesus' life and mission. Indeed, it is the *naturalistic rivals* that appear artificial, not the Resurrection Hypothesis.

5. Disconfirmed by Fewer Accepted Beliefs

Does the Resurrection Hypothesis conflict with any widely accepted background beliefs? Only if one insists on a closed naturalistic worldview in which miracles are excluded *a priori*. The generalization "dead men do not rise" is true as a statement about the natural order, but it does not disconfirm the claim "God raised Jesus from the dead." The two are logically consistent: by natural processes, the dead remain dead; but if God exists, the miraculous raising of Jesus is entirely possible.

By contrast, the rival hypotheses are disconfirmed by numerous accepted beliefs: conspiracies unravel, crucifixion victims do not survive, hallucinations are private and individual, legends require time to grow. Each naturalistic theory conflicts with established psychological, historical, or sociological knowledge. The Resurrection Hypothesis alone avoids such disconfirmation.

6. Comparative Superiority

Finally, the Resurrection Hypothesis decisively exceeds its rivals in meeting all the criteria of explanatory adequacy. It has the **widest explanatory scope**, covering the empty tomb, appearances, and disciples' faith. It has the **strongest explanatory power**, rendering the evidence probable rather than improbable. It has **plausibility** in both its historical (Jesus' life and claims) and philosophical (God's existence) contexts. It is **less contrived**, requiring fewer ad hoc assumptions than any rival. And it is **disconfirmed by none** of the relevant background beliefs, unlike all naturalistic alternatives.

For these reasons, contemporary scholarship finds itself perplexed by the stubborn resilience of the resurrection claim. The stupefaction of contemporary scholarship, when confronted with the Minimal Facts, is that no better rival is anywhere on the horizon.

Grand Synthesis: Weighing Every Major Rival Against the Resurrection by IBE

Having scrutinized each competing explanation in depth, we can now stand back and compare them **side by side** using the same six, standard **Inference to the Best Explanation (IBE)** criteria we've established: **(1) explanatory scope, (2) explanatory power, (3) plausibility, (4) less contrived (parsimony), (5) conflict with accepted beliefs, (6) comparative superiority**. The data set remains constant:

- the **empty tomb**,
- the **post-mortem appearances** (multiple individuals and groups, varied places/times, including skeptics/enemies), and

- the **sudden, sincere, public conviction** of the earliest Christians that **God raised Jesus bodily**, launched at risk within **Jerusalem** itself—plus the striking **conversions of James and Paul**.

On the next page is a compact "at-a-glance" matrix, followed by brief, criterion-by-criterion syntheses for each hypothesis and a concluding assessment of why, on IBE, **the Resurrection Hypothesis** emerges as the superior historical explanation.

Comparative Matrix (at a glance)

Hypothesis	Explanatory Scope	Explanatory Power	Plausibility (context: 1st-cent. Judaism + basic background knowledge)	Less-Contrived (fewest ad hoc moves)	Disconfirmed by Accepted Beliefs?	IBE Verdict
Conspiracy	Superficially broad (tomb, appearances, faith), but collapses on sincerity & diversity	Very weak (can't explain transformed courage, group/hostile-witness claims)	Low (1st-cent. Jews inventing a hoax of *resurrection* is anachronistic)	Highly ad hoc (motives, silence under persecution, zero defections)	Yes (instability of conspiracies; sincerity of witnesses)	Fails on power, plausibility, parsimony
Swoon / Apparent Death	Tries to cover tomb & appearances	Very weak (half-dead man inspires worship?)	Extremely low (Roman execution, spear thrust, medical fatality)	Ad hoc (survival, escape, travel, repeated appearances)	Yes (crucifixion lethality; Josephus case; medical data)	Collapses medically & psychologically
Displaced Body	Narrow (tomb only)	Weak even for tomb (Joseph could correct it; burial records)	Low (Jewish burial law/customs argue against later displacement)	Ad hoc (invented motives for Joseph; "silent" corrective)	Yes (customs about criminals, ossuary practice, early polemics)	Inadequate scope; contrived patches
Wrong Tomb	Narrow (tomb only)	Very weak (easy verification in Jerusalem; women saw burial site)	Low (known tomb of a Sanhedrist; early, unembellished tradition)	Ad hoc (selective acceptance of pericope details)	Yes (burial by Joseph; early empty-tomb tradition)	Dead on arrival historically
Hallucination (incl. "spiritual" variants / cognitive dissonance)	Narrow (appearances only)	Weak (group/varied/hostile appearances; Jewish category would be *assumption*, not *resurrection*)	Low-moderate (bereavement visions exist, but don't yield bodily resurrection claims)	Ad hoc (group hallucinations, tailored psychologies, skeptics converted)	Yes (nature of hallucinations; Paul's pre-Christian contentment; early bodily proclamation)	Most "serious" rival, but still fails on scope & cultural fit
Legend / Social-Memory Drift	Attempts broad coverage	Weak vs. *earliness* (1 Cor 15 creed; pre-Markan Passion; eyewitness generation alive)	Low (legendary rate would have to be "unbelievable")	Ad hoc (selective skepticism; ignores embarrassment criteria)	Yes (speed of proclamation in Jerusalem; hostile checks)	Time window too short; evidence too early
Twin / Impersonator	Narrow (some appearances)	Very weak (years of familiarity; wounds; tactile meals; James/Paul)	Minuscule (no evidence of a twin; vanishing impersonator)	Highly ad hoc (fabricated person, motives, staged wounds)	Yes (family lists; empty tomb unexplained)	Not a serious historical option
Alien / Tech Intervention	Superficially broad	Vacuous (could "explain" anything; no reason for Jewish-resurrection shape)	Near zero (no independent evidence; anachronistic category)	Maximal ad hoc (layered speculations without controls)	Yes (violates historical method constraints)	Not a historical explanation
Resurrection	**Comprehensive** (tomb, appearances, faith, conversions)	**Strong** (makes these very facts expected)	**Fitting** (given Jesus' life/claims + theism; culturally intelligible vindication)	**Parsimonious** (one unified cause; fewer patches than rivals)	**No** (unless one begs the question by excluding God a priori)	**IBE superior** across all six criteria

Synthesis by Hypothesis (why each fails under IBE)

Conspiracy. Even granting it "touches" all three data points, it hemorrhages **power** (why would liars embrace suffering/death?) and **plausibility** (first-century Jews had no conceptual incentive to fabricate *bodily resurrection*). It becomes **contrived** (invented motives, perfect silence under persecution, no defectors) and is **disconfirmed** by what we know of conspiracies and the disciples' sincerity.

Swoon / Apparent Death. It dies on **plausibility** (Roman crucifixion lethality; spear thrust), lacks **power** (a shattered survivor cannot generate worship as the glorified Lord), and quickly grows **ad hoc** (survival, escape, travel, repeated appearances). It is **disconfirmed** by medical and ancient evidence (e.g., Josephus' report of crucifixion survivals even with care rarely succeeding).

Displaced Body. At best it addresses one datum (the tomb), but its **scope** is too narrow; **power** is weak because Joseph (and his servants) could have corrected the misunderstanding; **plausibility** runs against Jewish burial law/custom; **contrived** motives must be invented; and it's **disconfirmed** by early polemics that argue theft, not displacement.

Wrong Tomb. Again, **scope** is narrow; **power** is feeble since the error was easily falsifiable in Jerusalem and women had **already observed the burial location**; **plausibility** is low because Joseph's prominent tomb was known; it's **ad hoc** in selectively trimming the narrative; and it is **disconfirmed** by the early, sober empty-tomb tradition.

Hallucination (incl. "spiritual resurrection," cognitive dissonance, and social-memory takes). Strongest of the naturalistic set, but still **fails scope** (no tomb), and **power** (no precedent for **group** experiences of identical content, across settings, including **skeptics/enemies**). Within a

Jewish frame, bereavement visions would suggest **assumption** or heavenly vindication, **not** bodily resurrection **in history**. Psychoanalytic reconstructions of Peter/Paul are speculative (**implausible**) and **contrived**, and the hypothesis collides with **accepted beliefs** about the nature of hallucinations and Paul's pre-Christian psychology.

Legend / Social Memory. The decisive blow is **time**: the **1 Cor 15** tradition and pre-Markan Passion material are **within years**, not generations. That earliness torpedoes legendary drift. The hypothesis therefore has poor **power** against the earliest strata, requires **ad hoc** selectivity (e.g., discarding embarrassment details like female witnesses), and is **disconfirmed** by the speed and locale (Jerusalem) of the proclamation under hostile scrutiny.

Twin / Impersonator. Starves on **scope** (no tomb), lacks **power** (intimate disciples repeatedly fooled? tactile wounds? meals?), and is almost comically **implausible** (no evidence of a twin; how were wounds replicated?). It is **contrived** to the hilt and **disconfirmed** by family lists and by the conversions of **James** and **Paul**.

Alien / Tech. Offers faux **scope** (anything could be "explained" by omnipotent tech) but zero **power** (no reason for the **distinctively Jewish** shape of the claim), near-zero **plausibility** (no independent evidence; anachronism), is maximally **contrived**, and is **disconfirmed** by the basic constraints of historical method.

The Positive Case by IBE: Why the Resurrection Hypothesis Wins

Explanatory Scope. It alone naturally unifies all the data: the empty tomb, the variegated appearances (to individuals, groups, friends, foes), and the explosive emergence of resurrection faith in Jerusalem, plus the conversions of James and Paul. No patchwork is needed.

Explanatory Power. If God raised Jesus, then an empty tomb, repeated post-mortem encounters, transformed courage, and unexpected conversions are exactly what one would predict. What is wildly improbable under conspiracy, swoon, legend, or hallucination becomes straightforward under resurrection.

Plausibility (historical + philosophical context). Historically, Jesus' unparalleled life and claims (authority to forgive sins, personal intimacy with the Father, kingdom embodiment) make divine vindication by resurrection fitting. Philosophically, once one admits the existence of God (as established earlier in Part I via the Modal Argument from Beginnings and corroborating considerations), a singular act of public revelation in raising Jesus is eminently plausible—not less plausible than rivals, but more.

Less-Contrived. Rivals multiply speculative patches (coordinated lies, medical marvel survival, unknown twin, mass multi-modal hallucinations, secret displacements, etc.). By contrast, the Resurrection Hypothesis posits one cause sufficient for the whole evidential field. And invoking a new entity is not "cheating": in every mature domain, postulating entities or causes is warranted when they increase explanatory success (the way quarks or black holes did in physics).

Not Disconfirmed by Accepted Beliefs. The generalization "dead people don't rise *naturally*" is compatible with "**God** raised Jesus." The hypothesis collides with no secure background belief; the **rivals** do (e.g., instability of conspiracies; lethality of crucifixion; nature of hallucinations; tempo of legend).

Comparative Superiority. Taking all five prior criteria together, the Resurrection Hypothesis dominates. It is not merely a little better; it is systemically better—across scope, power, plausibility, parsimony, and coherence—than every naturalistic competitor. In IBE terms, that is precisely

what licenses rational acceptance of an explanation, even when it is singular.

Anticipating the "Miracle A Priori" Objection

One often-heard pushback is methodological: "History can't infer miracles." But that is not a neutral rule; it simply **begs the question** against the data when miracle is the **best** explanation. Historians routinely infer **unique**, **non-repeatable** causes (the Big Bang; the origin of life; singular political decisions) because those causes exhibit **explanatory virtues**. If God exists (as argued in Part I), then there is no **in-principle** bar to a divine act in history. The proper methodological posture is **epistemic openness**: follow the evidence to the best explanation under clear criteria. On those criteria, **resurrection** wins.

Where This Leaves the Argument

With the field cleared and the comparison complete, the conclusion is now stark: if we are not ruled by an *a priori* naturalism, the Resurrection Hypothesis is the most adequate historical explanation of the relevant facts. It has the widest scope, the strongest power, is fittingly plausible given Jesus' life and theism, is least contrived, and conflicts with no secure background beliefs—while each naturalistic rival fails at multiple points.

Concluding Remarks

There are two ways to move through reality: as though it is an accident waiting to be explained away, or as though it is a story waiting to be understood. Across these pages we have pursued the second way—with the tools of careful logic and the humility of historical attention. Part I asked the oldest philosophical questions in the most disciplined modern form and found that the mansion of modal space points, not to endless contingency, but to a necessary, efficacious Mind—one whose existence anchors and

explains the finite, the fragile, and the first. Part II listened to the record of events at the hinge of history and found, not myth or wishful thinking, but a convergence of early data that is best explained by resurrection rather than re-description. The result is not a leap into the dark, but a step into the light: reason and record cohere.

This coherence matters. The argument from beginnings shows that "something like God" is not a decorative add-on but a structural necessity: a concrete, immaterial, timeless, volitional source with intelligence sufficient to underwrite the rational order we inhabit. That conclusion does not compel a particular theology, but it decisively re-weights the scales on which we place every other possibility. If reality is fundamentally personal, then the background probability of special, purposive action is not vanishingly small—it is live. And when the historical evidence then supplies an empty tomb, multiply attested appearances, and the sudden, public birth of a movement oriented around those claims, we are not stacking sentiment on sentiment; we are letting one strength confirm another. Prior metaphysics removes the principled barrier. Responsible historiography supplies the positive case. Together, they form a cord not easily broken.

To be sure, mystery remains. But mystery is not the enemy of knowledge; it is what knowledge faithfully guarded looks like at the edges. The same modesty that refuses to pretend omniscience also refuses to call ignorance "explanation." We did not ask our arguments to do what arguments cannot—coerce consent. We asked them to do what arguments can—clarify options, expose hidden assumptions, and show where the evidence points when we are honest about what we know and candid about what we don't. On that standard, the combined force of Parts I and II delivers a verdict of surprising simplicity: the world looks and behaves as though it issues from, and has been *visited* by, a transcendent Mind.

What follows from that is not a smug certainty but a summons—to intellectual integrity, moral seriousness, and practical hope. Intellectual integrity because it is easier to doubt than to do the work that makes doubt precise; moral seriousness because truth is not merely to be admired but obeyed; practical hope because if the deepest thing about reality is love expressed in action, then despair is a misreading of the evidence. It is an invitation to live as participants in a world that is intelligible because it is intended, and redeemable because it has already been engaged. The modal map tells us that Meaning is not a latecomer; the historical record tells us Meaning has a name and leaves footprints.

So let this final word be simple: live as though reality is charged with purpose—because it is. Let your mind be as rigorous as the arguments you have just read, and your heart as open as the history they illuminate. Ask your most difficult questions; this vision can bear the weight. If there is, at bedrock, a Necessary Mind who acts in love and truth, then none of our labors are wasted, none of our losses are final, and none of our hopes are naïve. We are, each of us, invited into alignment with the grain of the real—called to seek, to find, and to be found.

I do not claim to have said the last word. I only hope to have cleared the ground for a better hearing of the First Word—and to have shown why, on both rational and historical grounds, it is wise and good to answer. May your answering be thoughtful, courageous, and kind. It was always part of The Universal Plan.

Μετὰ ψυχῆς ἀκαταδάμαστου,

—Sam Nemri

Appendix

Part A – A (very brief) Overview of the Minimal Facts

The evidential core for the resurrection stands on (mostly) three independently secured facts: the empty tomb, the post-mortem appearances, and the sudden rise of the earliest Christian proclamation in Jerusalem that God had raised Jesus bodily from the dead. If these three facts are well supported, and if rival natural explanations fail to account for them with equal scope, power, and plausibility, then it is rational to judge the resurrection to be the best explanation of the data.

Begin with the empty tomb. The most direct route to it is through the burial. If Jesus was in fact buried in a known tomb in Jerusalem, then both friends and foes knew where that tomb was, and the claim that he had been raised could not have survived while a corpse lay in place. It would have been alien to Jewish thinking to affirm resurrection while a body remained in a grave; had the disciples tried it, no one in Jerusalem would have believed them, and the authorities could have ended the nascent movement by identifying the body. Hence a genuine burial strongly implies a genuine vacancy. The burial, in turn, enjoys unusually early and multiple attestation. Mark's Passion narrative draws on a pre-Markan source that most specialists date within the 30s, and the Pauline creed of 1 Corinthians 15:3–5—received by Paul no later than his AD 36 Jerusalem visit—explicitly includes "he was buried" as part of an early formula summarizing death, burial, resurrection "on the third day," and appearances. The burial by Joseph of Arimathea is multiply and independently reported in Matthew and Luke (which share non-Markan wording), in John (independent of the Synoptics), and is reflected in Acts' early preaching.

The figure of Joseph—a wealthy Sanhedrist from the very council that condemned Jesus—is precisely the sort of witness Christians would not invent; as Raymond Brown observed, that makes the story "very probable." From so broad and early a base, the step to an empty tomb is short.

The emptiness itself is likewise multiply and early attested. The burial and tomb discovery form a seamless linguistic unit in Mark's pre-gospel source; the early creed Paul cites presupposes a vacated grave in two ways: for first-century Jews, "buried…raised" entailed that the grave was left empty, and the dating "on the third day" most plausibly reflects the day the tomb was discovered empty. Matthew carries independent tradition, evident in non-Matthean vocabulary and in the guard story that responds to a live Jewish counter-claim; Luke adds an independent verification visit by male disciples; John again reports the empty tomb in an account widely regarded as independent of the Synoptics; and Acts contrasts David's occupied tomb with "this Jesus God raised." Mark's phrase "the first day of the week" is awkward Greek that retro-translates naturally into Aramaic and almost certainly predates the "third day" formula, another clue that we are dealing with very early Palestinian tradition. The character of Mark's narrative is strikingly sober: no description of Jesus exiting the tomb, no theological embroidery, simply a brief angelic interpretation—nothing like the later Gospel of Peter's giant Jesus, cosmic angels, and talking cross. Most telling of all is the role of women as principal witnesses. In a culture where women's testimony was widely discounted, making them the discoverers helps no apologetic purpose; the simplest explanation is that they were the discoverers. Attempts to explain their presence away—e.g., that Mark needed a device to explain why the empty tomb was unknown—are contrived and ignore that oral tradition has no qualms about bending facts when it wants to, whereas here the awkwardness remains. Finally, the earliest Jewish polemic presupposes emptiness: Matthew responds to the allegation that the disciples stole the body. Whatever one makes of the guard story, "they stole the body" is not what you say if a body is still in a tomb. On these cumulative

grounds, it is unsurprising that broad majorities in the literature accept the empty tomb's historicity; even Jewish scholars such as Lapide and Vermes have granted it.

The second fact concerns the appearances. Here the bedrock is Paul's list in 1 Corinthians 15:3–8. Paul relays a Jerusalem tradition and appends his own eyewitness status. He names Cephas/Peter; the Twelve; more than five hundred at once, most of whom, he notes, are still alive—a rhetorical invitation to check that he would not risk unless such witnesses existed; James, Jesus' brother; "all the apostles" (a wider missionary circle); and finally Paul himself, at the time a hostile persecutor. These entries are not airy theology: Paul spent two weeks with Peter three years after his own experience; he knew the Twelve; he interacted with James; and he staked his ministry on the reality of what he and they had encountered. The Gospels independently attest several of the same appearances: Peter (Luke 24:34), the Twelve (Luke 24; John 20) with concrete, tactile demonstrations that establish corporeality and continuity, the women (Matthew 28; John 20), and Galilean encounters (predicted in Mark, narrated in Matthew 28 and John 21). Arranged chronologically, the pattern Jerusalem → Galilee → Jerusalem maps onto the pilgrimage calendar from Passover toward Pentecost. Even prominent skeptics concede the core: different individuals and groups had experiences in which Jesus appeared to them as the risen Christ. The remaining question is what sort of experiences these were.

Two considerations point to bodily, world-external encounters rather than private inner visions. First is Paul's own resurrection doctrine. In 1 Corinthians 15 he contrasts the present body, dominated by frail human nature ("natural," psychikos), with the future body empowered by God's Spirit ("spiritual," pneumatikos). "Spiritual" here does not mean immaterial; it names the body's new mode—Spirit-directed—rather than its substance. Paul is not teaching disembodied immortality; he is presupposing transformed embodiment, and he grounds the Christian hope in Christ's own resurrection as the firstfruits. Second

is the New Testament's conceptual distinction between appearances and visions. Appearances are public, world-external events open in principle to shared perception; visions are wholly intra-mental, even if God-given (Stephen's vision in Acts 7, seen by him alone, is the paradigm). Paul can class his Damascus-road encounter as an appearance because there were external manifestations experienced to varying degrees by his companions. The Gospels, for their part, unanimously present embodied encounters—touch, wounds, meals—with no trace of a supposed earlier, purely "visionary" phase that later "materialized." If such a phase had existed, we would expect at least some memory of it. We have none.

The third fact is the origin and shape of the Christian movement. From the start, the church's kerygma was not a vague "Jesus lives on," nor a mere exaltation claim, but that God raised Jesus from the dead and he appeared. That proclamation reversed the public disaster of crucifixion: a crucified would-be messiah was, by definition, a failed pretender. Yet in a matter of weeks Jesus was proclaimed as both Lord and Messiah—openly, in Jerusalem, under the noses of those who had engineered his death. This was not the distinctive theology of one faction; it was the common foundation across the earliest communities. What could have generated that conviction?

It did not arise from "Christian influence," because Christianity did not exist to influence anyone until this belief produced it. It did not arise from pagan mythology. Proposed parallels either describe apotheoses (Romulus), political divinizations (Julius Caesar), disappearances into a higher realm (Apollonius), or seasonal fertility cycles (Osiris/Tammuz). None matches the Jewish idea of a one-off, bodily resurrection within history; specialists in ancient religion emphasize the category mistake, and Palestinian Jews regarded such cults as abhorrent. Nor did it arise from Jewish expectation. Jewish resurrection hope was overwhelmingly eschatological and collective: it concerned the resurrection of the dead at the end of the age, not the isolated resurrection of a single person in advance of the

rest, and certainly not of a crucified claimant to messiahship. That is why Martha hears "your brother will rise" and thinks of "the last day," and why the disciples puzzle over Jesus' prediction of rising before Elijah's coming. Second-Temple texts do not speak of a messiah raised ahead of the general resurrection; when messianic movements failed, their followers did not salvage the claim by asserting resurrection. In this context, even the common fallback—suppose there were an empty tomb and subjective visions—still fails to explain the *shape* of the earliest proclamation. Given Jewish categories, such a mix would most naturally be read as assumption or translation into heavenly glory (as with Enoch and Elijah, or the *Testament of Job*'s vanished children), not as resurrection within space-time. The content of the earliest Christian message therefore remains unexplained unless Jesus truly rose.

These three facts stand up under the same criteria historians use everywhere else. Multiple independent attestation is abundant: the burial and tomb in pre-Markan tradition, the early creed, Matthew/Luke/John/Acts; appearances in Paul plus multiple Gospel lines; the origin of the proclamation across the New Testament. Dissimilarity is evident in the unprecedented shape of a claim that the crucified Messiah had been bodily raised within history—unlike prior Judaism and unlike pagan mythology. Embarrassment surfaces in a Sanhedrist providing the burial and in women as first witnesses to the tomb. Contextual credibility is strong: the narratives fit first-century Jewish burial practice, and the proclamation's Jerusalem setting allowed hostile verification. Semitic traces mark both the creed and the empty-tomb phrasing ("the first day of the week"). Cause–effect reasoning favors resurrection: the conversions of James and Paul, the earliest Jewish theft claim, and the disciples' transformation all demand causes robust enough to produce them. Principles of embellishment cut in favor of Mark's restraint over the Gospel of Peter's extravagance. And the coherence among all three facts—an empty grave, embodied appearances, and a movement whose earliest

message was bodily resurrection—forms a mutually reinforcing triad.

The standard objections do not overturn this convergence. Saying “history cannot infer miracles” is not a historical conclusion but a philosophical veto. Historians routinely infer singular, non-repeatable causes when they best explain the evidence. If God exists—as argued earlier in the book—then divine action is not an illicit posit. The charge that Paul “doesn’t mention the empty tomb” ignores how his creed presupposes it conceptually and temporally. Dismissing Matthew’s guard pericope as apologetic does not touch the datum that the earliest Jewish counter-claim already assumes the tomb was empty. The absence of a tomb-shrine is exactly what one expects if no remains were there to venerate. And the “legend” suggestion stumbles on timing: the creed lies within a handful of years, the Passion source in the 30s, the proclamation is made in the very city where checks were possible, and the narratives retain awkward features that later legend would smooth away. The legendary “rate” required would be, in the judgment of classicists, unbelievable.

Taken together, the empty tomb, the appearances, and the origin of Easter faith form a convergent case that is early, multiply attested, culturally congruent, and explanatorily potent. Assessing the live hypotheses by the usual historical virtues—explanatory scope and power, plausibility in context, parsimony, and harmony with background knowledge—resurrection uniquely succeeds where naturalistic rivals falter. If one does not exclude divine action a priori, the best explanation of the facts remains the one the earliest Christians staked everything on: God raised Jesus from the dead, and they saw him.

Part B – Historical Methodology and the Use of Criteria

Any responsible case for (or against) the resurrection must begin with method, not conclusions. The New Testament writings should be handled the same way historians treat other ancient texts: neither as automatically inerrant nor as automatically unreliable, but as ordinary first-century sources to be weighed with standard tools. Those tools are not exotic. They include establishing the text, situating each document in its literary genre and historical setting, tracing lines of dependence and independence among sources, and then applying well-worn criteria—multiple independent attestation, embarrassment, dissimilarity (or unexpectedness), coherence, linguistic and cultural congruence, and causal adequacy—to test particular claims. None of these on its own compels a verdict; together they function like a series of cross-checks that raise or lower the probability of discrete pieces of evidence and, more importantly, of a proposed explanation for the whole. The point of this appendix is to make that process explicit and to show how, when followed consistently, it yields a tight evidential core for the resurrection data without presupposing a special view of Scripture—and how, once the philosophical groundwork of Part I is granted (that a Necessary Mind exists and can act), the resurrection hypothesis becomes not a gap-stopper but the best overall explanation.

Method begins with the text we are actually assessing. Textual criticism asks whether we possess what the authors wrote closely enough to make historical judgments. Here the New Testament fares at least as well as, and usually far better than, other ancient literature: an unusually thick manuscript tradition; multiple early witnesses; and a mature critical apparatus that allows scholars to identify and bracket later additions or corruptions. This does not mean the text is flawless; it means we are not arguing in a fog. We can delineate the wording of, say, 1 Corinthians 15:3–7 or the Markan passion narrative with a precision sufficient

for historical work. That “floor” matters, because probabilities in history collapse if the text itself is radically indeterminate. It is not.

The next step is literary and historical situating. The Gospels read most naturally as Greco-Roman *bioi*—ancient biographies that aim to present a subject’s deeds and teaching with theological or moral interests, yes, but with a recognizable historical spine. Acts is historiography with a focus on the early movement’s expansion. Paul’s undisputed letters are letters—occasional, argumentative, and datable within a decade or two of Jesus’ death. Dating and genre are not mere preliminaries. When sources cluster within living memory, in the same locales where the events occurred, legendary displacement becomes progressively harder, and cross-examination by friend and foe becomes more plausible. In this respect the resurrection material is unusual: we have a pre-Pauline tradition he “received” and “passed on,” embedded in a letter written roughly two decades after the crucifixion, which itself almost certainly crystallized within a few years of the events; we have passion material used by Mark that many specialists push very early; and we have independent streams in Matthew/Luke and John. That temporal proximity—combined with the movement’s explosive, public launch in Jerusalem—sets stiff constraints on what sort of explanations will be historically workable.

With text and setting in place, historians map dependence and independence. This matters because “two sources saying the same thing” helps only if they did not simply copy one another. Independence here is never absolute, but it is often good enough: Paul’s creedal summary is not derived from our written Gospels; the speeches in Acts, while stylized, preserve early proclamation that resonates with but does not parrot the evangelists; John’s tradition frequently shows awareness of, but independence from, Synoptic formulations; and Matthew/Luke, while indebted to Mark, also bear non-Markan material on the burial and appearances. Independence is also signaled by the very *shape* of narrative overlap and divergence: the same core

anchored by different incidental detail is precisely what one expects from multiple memories of the same events and is suspiciously unlike collusion.

At that point the classic criteria come into play. *Multiple independent attestation* has exceptional force in the resurrection case. The burial/empty-tomb sequence is not a single late tale: pre-Markan passion material, Paul's creed (whose "he was buried … he was raised … he appeared" aligns neatly with the burial/empty-tomb/appearance pattern), distinct Synoptic seams, Johannine narrative, and the early Jerusalem kerygma in Acts converge. The appearance claims enjoy the same: Paul lists individuals and groups (Peter, the Twelve, 500, James, "all the apostles," himself), and at least some of these have independent narrative counterparts in Luke and John. The very *diversity* of settings—indoors and outdoors, in Jerusalem and Galilee, to friends and a former enemy—plays against the notion of a single imaginative template slowly elaborated by the same community. If you adopted this density of independent attestation for episodes in Alexander's or Caesar's careers—and historians do—you would treat those episodes as historically well grounded. Consistency demands the same here.

Embarrassment tests whether a feature is so awkward for the early movement that it is unlikely to have been invented. Two striking pieces meet this test. First, the women as principal discoverers of the empty tomb in a culture that commonly discounted women's testimony: if you were crafting apologetic fiction, you would not lead with witnesses your contemporaries regarded as weak. Second, Joseph of Arimathea—a member of the council that, in Christian memory, condemned Jesus—performing an honorable burial: that places a hostile elite in a positive role, the opposite of what a propagandist would concoct. Add to these the disciples' fear, flight, and initial doubts, all conserved in the tradition in ways that hardly flatter the founding leaders. The more a hypothesis must *explain away* rather than *explain* embarrassment, the weaker it becomes.

Dissimilarity (or unexpectedness) is frequently misused when abstracted from context, but carefully applied it has bite. Within Second Temple Judaism "resurrection" denoted bodily raising at the end of the age, not the mid-history vindication of a single executed messianic claimant. The earliest proclamation—"God has raised Jesus"—is thus not a straightforward projection of prior expectation. Nor is it a late doctrinal gloss: the earliest strata already speak this way. Exactly because it is *not* the most culturally convenient claim, its early ubiquity counts in favor of authenticity. Used cautiously, this criterion blocks easy appeals to generic mythmaking while steering us back to the Jewish matrix in which the claim first made sense: the God of Israel has acted.

Coherence tests how well individual items fit with material already judged authentic. Here the interlocking is unusually tight. Paul's robust "resurrection-of-the-body" theology (not mere immortality of the soul) coheres with physical, public appearances and with an empty tomb. The conversions of James and Paul—one a skeptical family insider, the other an active opponent—cohere with appearances not limited to sympathetic bereaved disciples. The launch of a resurrection proclamation in Jerusalem coheres with a missing corpse there. One may reject any of these individually; rejecting the *pattern* becomes progressively costly.

Linguistic and cultural congruence protects against anachronism. Semitic substrata and early idioms—e.g., the awkward Greek phrase "the first day of the week," which renders naturally back into Aramaic—signal that we are not reading free-floating Greek theology but tradition formed in a Palestinian milieu. Burial details align with what archaeology and Jewish sources tell us of first-century interment and lament practice. Polemical exchanges align with Jewish–Christian friction we would expect in Jerusalem: the earliest counterclaim is not "there is a body in a tomb you can visit" but "the disciples stole the body," which concedes the vacancy of the grave and moves the dispute to an explanation of that datum. Enemy attestation

of this sort is historically potent precisely because it is adversarial.

Effect (or causal adequacy) asks whether a proposed cause is sufficient for the historical consequences that plainly followed. Whatever happened turned frightened followers into public witnesses willing to face imprisonment and death; propelled Jesus' own skeptical brother into leadership of the Jerusalem church; converted an enemy into its chief missionary; and generated an early, bodily resurrection proclamation in the very city of the crucifixion. A cause that cannot plausibly produce those effects—say, a lone bereavement vision, or a half-dead survivor limping out of a tomb—fails this test. The principle here is not theological; it is the ordinary historical maxim that a sufficient cause must be commensurate with the observed effect.

A word about *minor divergences* and *undesigned interlockings*. Witnesses to real events typically agree on the core and differ in incidentals. If four accounts reproduced each other verbatim, we would suspect collusion. What we actually see is a recognizable core with differences in peripheral detail—order, emphasis, wording—that is exactly what independent memory looks like. Often those differences subtly interlock: one source raises a question another incidentally answers without intending to. Historians do not over-read such "undesigned coincidences," but they treat them as mild indicators of authenticity and independence.

What, then, of *oral tradition* and memory? Modern studies of memory in traditional cultures show that orally transmitted material can be both flexible at the edges and firm at the core—especially where communities care deeply about preservation, where material is deliberately framed for memorization, and where named witnesses function as reference points. The earliest Christians fit that profile. The creedal cadence of 1 Corinthians 15 ("that Christ died … and that he was buried … and that he was

raised … and that he appeared …"), the repetition of key names (Cephas/Peter, the Twelve, James), and the habit of singling out locales ("in Galilee," "in Jerusalem") all look like early, structured proclamation. That does not immunize the tradition from development; it does mean blanket appeals to "social memory" cannot simply dissolve robust, early, multiply attested cores.

All of this feeds into *inference to the best explanation*. Historians, like scientists, rarely enjoy deductive certainty. They choose the hypothesis that best balances scope (how much it explains), power (how well it makes the evidence expected), plausibility (fit with background knowledge), parsimony (fewest unsupported add-ons), and freedom from conflict with well-established facts. On those criteria, the naturalistic rivals struggle: conspiracy theories collapse under psychology and under the disciples' costly sincerity; swoon scenarios collide with Roman execution practice and fail to generate the triumphant faith we actually see; wrong-tomb and displaced-body proposals are narrow in scope and brittle under Jewish burial custom and early polemic; legend requires time and distance the sources do not give; hallucination must be multiplied (and diversified) into unprecedented, coordinated group experiences—including skeptics and an enemy—*and* paired with a second hypothesis to cover the empty tomb, all while swimming against the current of Jewish expectation, which would more naturally have produced claims of heavenly assumption rather than bodily resurrection within history. By contrast, "God raised Jesus" unifies the data without contrivance and makes the pattern positively *expected* if there is a God who might vindicate Jesus' radical life and claims.

At this juncture the groundwork of Part I matters. Historical method does not prove theism; philosophical argument can render it rational. If reality is grounded in a Necessary Mind capable of acting, then the old "history-can't-infer-miracle" veto is not a methodological necessity but a metaphysical prejudice. Historians regularly infer singular, non-repeatable causes when those best explain public

evidence. A theistic background removes the a priori stranglehold Humean objections wield; it raises the *prior* that a unique act of divine self-disclosure could occur at the hinge of a uniquely significant life. In that light, the resurrection hypothesis is neither an appeal to ignorance nor a trump card but a straightforward application of IBE: among live competitors, it alone exhibits superior scope, power, plausibility, parsimony, and fit.

Two cautions complete the picture. First, criteria can be misused. "Dissimilarity," detached from context, can become a license to accept only what surprises us; the right use is comparative: unexpectedness relative to both antecedent Judaism and later Christian theology can weigh in favor of authenticity, but it is never absolute. Second, method must avoid both over-harmonization and hyper-skepticism. We need not sandpaper every wrinkle between accounts; neither should we magnify minor tensions into disproofs of substance. The historian's art lives in the middle: granular weighing, cumulative judgment, and open comparison of rival explanations under shared standards.

Put together, this is why the resurrection case can be mounted without special pleading. The documents are close enough in time and stable enough in text to permit inquiry; their genre and setting give them the same prima facie credibility we afford other ancient sources; the key claims clear multiple, independent criteria; oral-cultural dynamics explain both the stiffness of the core and the flexibility of incidentals; the effects demand a cause proportionate to them; and, given the philosophical backdrop argued in Part I, the "divine vindication" hypothesis is no methodological outlier. The upshot is not certainty—for historians almost never get that—but a robust, public, and rationally compelling case that the resurrection hypothesis best explains the data we actually have.

A striking feature of contemporary New Testament study is that, after two centuries of rigorous criticism, a wide, cross-confessional center of gravity has emerged on the bedrock facts surrounding Easter—even among scholars who do not themselves confess the resurrection. This is not a matter of "apologist versus skeptic" talking past each other; it reflects repeated, public, peer-facing judgments about early sources, genre, chronology, and historical method. The center holds firm on at least these points: Jesus of Nazareth existed; he was executed by crucifixion under Pontius Pilate; he was buried; very soon thereafter, individuals and groups of his followers sincerely believed they had encounters with him alive again; the earliest proclamation announcing this conviction sprang up in Jerusalem and spread rapidly; within that proclamation, a tight, pre-Pauline formula (1 Cor 15:3–7) crystallized within a handful of years; and key skeptics—James, the brother of Jesus, and Saul/Paul the persecutor—were abruptly won over by what they took to be appearances of the risen Jesus. On these items you will find agreement from historians as diverse as E. P. Sanders, James D. G. Dunn, N. T. Wright, Larry Hurtado, Dale Allison, Bart Ehrman, Géza Vermes, and even the atheist critic Gerd Lüdemann (who famously conceded that it is "historically certain" that Peter and the disciples had experiences in which Jesus appeared to them as risen). Disagreement remains, of course—most sharply over the nature of those experiences and whether historians may infer divine action—but the convergence on the "what" to be explained is unusually strong by the standards of ancient history.

The backbone of this convergence is the dating and independence of our earliest sources. The undisputed Pauline letters are universally placed in the 50s CE, within twenty years of the crucifixion, and 1 Corinthians 15:3–7 is almost unanimously treated as a tradition Paul "received" earlier—very plausibly in the mid-30s, when he first consulted Cephas (Peter) and James in Jerusalem. Dunn,

Hurtado, Jeremias, Wilckens, and Wright—stretching from cautious to confessional—concur that this creed carries us back within a few years of Jesus' death. That matters: it compresses the window for wholesale legendary development and situates the resurrection proclamation inside the lifetime, locales, and memory-space of both adherents and opponents. The passion narrative embedded in Mark is likewise pushed early by a wide array of German, British, and American scholars; and while Matthew and Luke use Mark, they also carry non-Markan material on the burial and appearances, while John supplies an independent line of tradition that frequently intersects the Synoptic core without obviously depending upon it. Add to this the speeches in Acts, which—though literary—echo the same primitive pattern ("you killed him … God raised him … we are witnesses"), and the result is not a single late source but multiple, converging streams from the first generation.

On the empty tomb, the center of gravity is a strong majority rather than unanimity. Surveys of the academic literature (e.g., Gary Habermas's multi-decade audits) consistently report that most scholars writing on the subject judge the empty tomb tradition to be historical, with support drawn from its early attestation, its embedding in the burial narrative, the awkward prominence of women as chief discoverers, and the trajectory of early Jewish polemic, which assumes a missing body and argues theft rather than pointing the movement to an occupied grave. Jewish historians like Pinchas Lapide judged the evidence for the empty tomb impressive (Lapide went so far as to accept Jesus' resurrection as an act of Israel's God while remaining Jewish); other critical voices—Michael Grant, C. E. B. Cranfield, and many more—have argued that, judged by the same criteria used elsewhere in classical studies, the case for the empty tomb is historically weighty. Skeptical scholars such as Ehrman or Vermes are more reserved: they tend to treat the appearances as better established than the empty tomb, but they do not deny that a strong historical argument can be made for the tomb's vacancy. What is absent in the center of the guild is any serious uptake of

"wrong tomb" or "displaced body" theories; such proposals are widely regarded as narrow in scope and brittle under the evidence of early tradition and Jewish burial practice.

On the appearances, the consensus is stronger still. Almost across the board, critical scholars affirm that multiple individuals and groups—preeminently Peter, the Twelve, and others—had experiences they interpreted as appearances of the risen Jesus. Lüdemann, Allison, Ehrman, and Sanders—all personally cautious about miracle claims—nonetheless underscore that these experiences must be granted as historical data because they are multiply attested, early, and connected to named persons who stood at the movement's core. The nature of those experiences is the point of dispute. Wright, Craig, Bauckham, Keener, and many Catholic and evangelical scholars argue for bodily, public encounters that cohere with a Jewish understanding of resurrection and with an empty tomb. Others, such as Lüdemann and (in a more nuanced key) Allison, propose that grief-, guilt-, or religion-inflected visions best account for at least some of the appearances, while admitting that such reconstructions strain under the diversity (individuals and groups, friends and an enemy) and the movement's Jewish framework, which would more naturally have produced claims of heavenly "assumption" rather than mid-history resurrection. Importantly, even those who prefer visionary models typically acknowledge that purely subjective experiences cannot by themselves explain the rise of the bodily resurrection proclamation without additional historical factors. That acknowledgment marks the shared problem space: whatever explanation is offered must be strong enough to generate the kind of public, bodily resurrection proclamation we in fact see, in Jerusalem, immediately, under scrutiny.

The conversions of James and Paul function in the literature as hard-edged control points. Josephus confirms James's leadership and martyrdom; Paul's pre-Christian persecution and subsequent mission are bedrock. From Sanders to Dunn to Fredriksen to Wright, there is broad

agreement that any viable hypothesis must make sense of these two trajectories. James was not a credulous outsider but a skeptical insider, a brother whose initial stance toward Jesus was negative; his elevation to leadership in Jerusalem begs for an event-level cause. Paul, for his part, was not psychologically primed to see what he eventually claimed; the "Damascus" encounter remains a datum that even critics who favor visionary categories must treat as an externally disruptive event with communal consequences. This is why, even in skeptical reconstructions, James and Paul are rarely explained by social contagion from the Galilean disciples; their vectors are too independent, their roles too central, and their prior commitments too strong to be absorbed by simple group dynamics.

Equally significant is the collapse, within mainstream scholarship, of the old "pagan-myth" parallel hunt as an explanation for Easter faith. From Jonathan Z. Smith to T. N. D. Mettinger (himself unusually open to "dying and rising gods" in a limited sense), the verdict is that whatever seasonal or apotheosis motifs existed in surrounding cultures do not map onto the Jewish, mid-history, bodily resurrection claimed for Jesus. The interpretive background for the earliest proclamation is Jewish eschatology, not Greco-Roman vegetation cults. This shift—often called the "Jewish reclamation" of Jesus—has been driven as much by skeptical historians as by believing ones, and it sharply narrows the menu of live explanations. When your background is late-Second-Temple Judaism, not comparative mythology, "resurrection" has a specific, bodily sense, and claims about one man's being raised ahead of the general resurrection are recognized as unprecedented—hence in need of real historical accounting.

Assessments of Acts and Luke's historiography also push in the same direction. Archaeologists and historians (Ramsay in an earlier generation; more recently Colin Hemer and others) have documented Luke's accuracy on minor administrative titles, geography, and travel detail—hardly a direct proof of miracles, but a cumulative

argument that, where testable, Luke tends to get things right. Classical historian A. N. Sherwin-White's oft-quoted observation about the pace of legendary accretion in antiquity—that wholesale legend does not typically swamp core history within a couple of generations—has been adopted by many who are otherwise critical of Christian claims, because it simply reflects how ancient historiography works. When applied to the resurrection traditions (which are earlier than that generational window), it raises the bar for "legendary development" as a blanket solution.

Where, then, do disagreements remain? Two large questions divide the guild. First: What is the historian permitted to conclude? Many historians—Ehrman is representative—adopt a methodological naturalism according to which "God raised Jesus" is not an admissible historical inference, however well it might fit the data, because divine agency cannot be weighed with ordinary historical tools. Others (Wright, Swinburne, Craig, Licona, and a spectrum of Catholic and Protestant scholars) argue that history routinely infers unique causes when warranted and that if a theistic worldview is at least live (as argued philosophically in Part I), the "no-miracles-in-history" veto is not methodologically neutral but metaphysically loaded. Second: How should the appearances be characterized? Here the line runs not between "believer" and "skeptic" but through both camps. Some believing scholars stress the bodily, public nature of the encounters in continuity with Jewish resurrection hope; some cautious scholars, like Allison, stress the complexity of visionary phenomena while still acknowledging that the sheer variety and communal spread of the Easter experiences are without close psychological parallel; others, like Lüdemann, posit visions rooted in grief or guilt but must then add auxiliary theses to account for their breadth and for the specifically *resurrectional* (not merely visionary) shape of the earliest proclamation. The point is not that there is unanimity, but that all competing reconstructions are compelled to reckon with the same stout bundle of early, public facts.

Finally, two clarifications help readers interpret "consensus" responsibly. First, consensus that certain facts occurred is not the same thing as consensus on the best explanation of those facts. The former is broadly shared: crucifixion, burial, rapid emergence of resurrection belief, named appearances, conversions of James and Paul, and the early creedal summary are standard fare in critical introductions. The empty tomb enjoys majority (not universal) support. The latter—what best explains them—remains contested largely because of differing metaphysical starting points, not because the historical scaffolding is weak. Second, the bar for "legend-only" explanations is, in the mainstream guild, higher than popular treatments suggest. Because the resurrection proclamation is documented in our earliest strata, and because it assumes rather than invents core features (bodily resurrection within a Jewish frame), attempts to dissolve Easter into myth have largely retreated from the center to the margins.

In sum, a candid survey of contemporary scholarship yields a picture that is both modest and remarkable. Modest—because professional historians are diverse in philosophical commitment and method, and few in secular settings will affirm "God raised Jesus" as a formal historical conclusion. Remarkable—because that same diverse guild has, by shared critical standards, delivered a compact set of early, stubborn facts that demand explanation: Jesus was crucified and buried; very soon, named individuals and groups—including former skeptics—were convinced they encountered him alive; an explosively public, bodily resurrection proclamation ignited in Jerusalem; and a pre-Pauline summary carrying these claims can be tracked to the movement's first years. Where one goes from there will depend in part on whether Part I's philosophical case for a Necessary Mind is granted. But what can no longer be responsibly said is that the historical floor is mushy. It is not. The scholarly middle has made it firm. If Part I is correct, the terrain is already laid out.

For many readers the decisive obstacle is not the history but the horizon behind it. “Miracles don’t happen,” we are told; therefore no amount of first-century testimony could ever license belief in one. That objection only succeeds, however, if its philosophy is already settled in advance—if reality is a closed, godless system in which every event is exhaustively produced by impersonal physical causes. Part I of this work undercut that presupposition. There we argued that the best explanation of the existence and intelligibility of the cosmos is a Necessary Mind with causal powers—personal agency whose will grounds the order we call “the laws of nature.” If that conclusion is even modestly probable, the status of miracles is transformed. They are no longer violations of nature by an alien force, but rare, purposive acts of the same personal source who continuously sustains nature. The question ceases to be “Can miracles occur?” and becomes “Did this miracle occur on this occasion, for good reasons, in a context that makes sense?” The historical case for the resurrection must then be weighed on its historical merits, not dismissed by fiat.

Much of the resistance here traces to David Hume’s celebrated critique. Hume defined a miracle as a violation of a law of nature and claimed that our “uniform experience” of the laws gives us always stronger evidence against any miracle than we could ever have for it. Both halves falter. First, the definition. On the classical theistic account, a “law” is a stable description of how created causes operate given ordinary conditions; it is not a metaphysical straitjacket on the First Cause. When an agent freely acts on a system—say, a musician striking a piano—the motion of the strings is not a “violation” of acoustics, but an *additional* cause operating within and upon the order those laws describe. Likewise, if God acts in nature, the event is not lawless; it has a lawful *profile* (bodies still fall, wounds still bleed) plus a higher-level cause that nature’s impersonal processes do not supply on their own (e.g., the

reanimation and transformation of a corpse). Miracles are thus not intrusions from outside reality but personal actions by the Author within a story he is already writing line by line. Second, the claim about "uniform experience" is question-begging. If God exists and has ever acted, then experience is *not* uniform; and whether he has acted is precisely what is in dispute. Hume's rule therefore smuggles in, as a premise, the very conclusion it wants to prove.

A better way to think about this is Bayesian. Prior to examining the Easter evidence (E), ask what the probability of a resurrection (R) would be on two different backgrounds: theism (T) and naturalism (~T). On strict naturalism, *any* resurrection has prior probability essentially zero; no amount of historical evidence could ever dislodge it, because the hypothesis is ruled out a priori. On theism, by contrast—especially if Part I's case for a Necessary Mind with reasons to disclose himself stands—the prior is small but live. It is not "miracles everywhere," but "miracles are possible when purposive reasons are strong." Now update with the data: a well-evidenced burial and empty tomb, multiple early, multi-party appearances (including to skeptics and an enemy), and the explosive rise of bodily-resurrection proclamation in Jerusalem. On R & T, E is exactly the sort of pattern we would expect if God chose to vindicate Jesus uniquely; on any single naturalistic rival, much of E is astonishingly unlikely; and on the patchwork of multiple naturalistic add-ons (hallucinations *plus* body displacement *plus* perfect conspiratorial silence, etc.), the prior collapses under contrivance. In Bayesian terms, the likelihood ratio $P(E|R \,\&\, T)/P(E|\neg R \,\&\, \sim T)$ becomes very large, and the posterior for R given E and T rises accordingly. Hume's blanket veto gives way to ordinary historical reasoning: weigh hypotheses by explanatory scope, power, plausibility, parsimony, and fit with background knowledge.

But doesn't a miracle contradict "the laws"? Only if one assumes a mechanistic metaphysics that Part I has already unsettled. Laws, on a theistic account, are the regular habits

of a contingent world continuously willed and intelligibly ordered by its Creator. They tell us what nature does *when left to itself*; they do not tell us what nature will do when its Author freely chooses to bring about a special sign for a redemptive purpose. In that sense, miracles are not "gaps in knowledge" but *additions of cause*. They do not erase physics; they *include* physics within a larger personal causality—just as your decision to raise your arm does not violate biomechanics but works *through* it. This reframing matters for history: the historian need not reproduce a miracle in a laboratory to judge it the best explanation of past data, any more than she must reproduce Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon. The question is whether the hypothesis, once admitted as possible, excels its rivals by the standard criteria historians actually use.

Hume also leaned heavily on the unreliability of testimony. People err, embellish, or deceive; religious movements breed credulity. All true—sometimes. That is why the Christian claim stubbornly locates itself where testimony is strongest and error is hardest to sustain: in proximate time (first-generation sources), in hostile territory (Jerusalem), with named witnesses (Peter, James, the Twelve; eventually Paul), under public risk (persecution), across independent streams (Pauline creedal tradition; Mark's passion source; non-Markan material in Matthew and Luke; Johannine tradition; speeches in Acts). Yes, human testimony can be poor; but the *quality* and configuration of these particular witnesses is precisely what one asks for when testing ancient claims. Hume's general suspicion of testimony is a prudential rule; it is not a trump card against any specific, well-attested event—especially when rival, purely natural explanations repeatedly falter under the same evidential standards.

A different form of the objection says that "miracle" is not an explanation at all. It is a label placed where our understanding fails—"God of the gaps." That is a fair worry if invoking God merely interrupts inquiry. But the resurrection hypothesis is not ignorance wearing a halo; it is an inference to personal agency grounded in positive

indicators: the fit with Jesus' unique life and claims; the purposive timing (Passover; messianic expectations), place (Jerusalem), and content (bodily resurrection within Israel's scriptural frame); the moral and existential transformation it unleashed; and the stubborn triad of facts (empty tomb, appearances, origin of the movement) for which naturalistic proposals repeatedly underperform. In other domains we happily infer agency when the pattern merits it. If stones on a beach spell *WELCOME HOME* in neat rows, we do not hunt for freak tides; we infer a mind. If Part I has already made a mind at the root of things more probable than not, then a singular, meaning-laden historical event that coheres with that mind's goals is not a gap but a *convergent* explanation.

Another anxiety is methodological: can historians, as historians, ever conclude "God acted"? Many adopt "methodological naturalism" as a professional rule of thumb and worry that to allow exceptions is to dissolve the discipline. Two clarifications help. First, historians already infer singular, non-repeatable causes when warranted: the Big Bang, the assassination that triggers a war, the once-off volcanic eruption that buries a city. What they require is not repeatability but explanatory virtues applied to public evidence. Second, a modest openness to special divine action need not collapse into credulity. It simply means that, if a theistic worldview is a live option (as argued in Part I), historians should not forbid, in advance, the conclusion that best meets their own criteria merely because it is theistic. The alternative is not neutrality but a covert metaphysical veto—one that pre-judges rather than adjudicates the case.

But perhaps one is dissatisfied with the analysis thus far and would like some concrete, objective criteria for the identification of a miracle. Stephen Bilynskyj provides the following criteria for identifying some event *E* as a miracle:

(1) The evidence for the occurrence of *E* is at least as good as it is for other acceptable but unusual events similarly distant in time and space from the point of the inquiry;

(2) An account of the natures and/or powers of the causally relevant natural agents, such that they could account for *E*, would be clumsy and *ad hoc*;

(3) There is no evidence, except the inexplicability of *E,* for one or more natural agents which could produce *E*;

(4) There is some justification for a supernatural explanation of *E*, independent of the inexplicability of *E.*[56]

These criteria seem quite correct. In fact, the resurrection of Jesus meets these criteria.[57] The reader is encouraged to critically test this himself.

Finally, context matters for plausibility. On bare theism, the prior for any miracle is small; on bare naturalism, it is zero. But the resurrection claim does not arise in a vacuum. It is tethered to a life and teaching that, by widespread scholarly admission, carried an unheard-of authority; to a self-understanding and a symbolic program (kingdom, forgiveness, table fellowship, temple sayings) that placed Jesus at the crest of Israel's story; and to announced intentions that something climactic would occur. If a God who is both righteous and self-revealing exists, then vindicating *this* person in *this* way at *this* juncture is not arbitrary. As Swinburne and Wright (from different angles) have argued, the prior becomes not merely *non-zero* but *fitting*. That does not force the conclusion; it frames it. And once framed, the cumulative, early, and multiply attested evidence for the empty tomb, the appearances, and the

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[56] Stephen S. Bilynskyj, "God, Nature, and the Concept of Miracle" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Notre Dame, 1982), p. 222.
[57] See William Lane Craig's Response to Question of the Week #687. https://www.reasonablefaith.org/question-answer/P20/are-we-justified-in-inferring-jesus-resurrection#_edn1

origin of the Easter proclamation no longer labors under a philosophical headwind. It can be heard for what it says.

In sum, the “big background objection” dissolves when the background changes. If Part I is sound—if reality is anchored in a Necessary Mind with reasons to communicate and redeem—then miracles are not category mistakes. They are rare, intelligible acts of personal agency within an ordered world. Under that background, the resurrection no longer faces a blanket veto; it faces the same adjudication any historical hypothesis faces. And by the historian’s own standards—explanatory scope, power, plausibility in context, parsimony, and concord with accepted facts—the resurrection excels its rivals. The philosophical door that Hume seemed to slam shut stands open after all, and the evidence waiting on the threshold is exactly the kind that, in every other corner of our intellectual life, warrants belief. In other words, if Part I is right, then God exists, and the philosophical objection to miracles collapses.

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Subsequent Reflections

Part A – Knocking Down the Problem of Evil

Perhaps the most formidable intellectual challenge to belief in God is what has long been called the problem of evil. While Christianity can be established on two independent foundations—the reality of some transcendent Mind (as demonstrated by the MAB in Part I) and the resurrection of Christ (as argued by the Minimal Facts approach in Part II)—without venturing into this further issue, it nonetheless seems essential to engage it for anyone pursuing a comprehensive and mature worldview. Both arguments stand on their own as sound, but the question should still be faced.

The so-called "problem of evil" (along with most atheistic objections) does *not*, despite widespread assumption, logically challenge the *existence* of God. To say that moral outrage at atrocities disproves God's existence would be as nonsensical as claiming that condemning Hitler's crimes undermines Hitler's existence. Rather, the problem of evil addresses questions about God's *moral character and purposes*. Here, "God" is defined in the narrower sense—as the necessary, conscious, concrete being established by the MAB—not yet in the fuller, classical theistic sense (i.e., an omnibenevolent, absolutely perfect being).

Thus, even while remaining agnostic about God's moral character or intentions, we can rationally affirm *both* that God exists (since the modal proof remains constant) and that God raised Jesus from the dead (since the historical bedrock and IBE criteria remain unchanged). But we cannot remain at this level indefinitely. Our inquiry must

go beyond bare existence and identity; we rightly long to know what God is *like*—His moral character and His intentions—not merely that He *is.* The difficulty lies in this: if there truly exists a God who is *both* all-powerful and wholly *good*, it seems puzzling—if not implausible—that the world should contain such immense amounts of pain and suffering.

The scale of human misery is beyond calculation. Some of this suffering stems from humanity's cruelty to itself—acts of injustice, violence, and oppression. Yet what often appears even harder to reconcile with divine goodness and power are the tragedies that occur apart from human agency. These include natural disasters such as floods, earthquakes, or hurricanes; diseases like smallpox, polio, cancer, or leukemia; congenital conditions such as muscular dystrophy or cerebral palsy; and devastating accidents like drowning, crushing injuries, or severe burns. In many cases, natural and moral evils are interwoven, as when famine in East Africa has been exacerbated not by a lack of food, but by authoritarian regimes deliberately blocking relief supplies to weaken their opponents. When one considers the breadth and depth of suffering—whether caused by human malice or natural processes—the very existence of an all-good, all-powerful God seems called into question.

Over roughly the last twenty-five years, philosophers have devoted sustained attention to this problem, and their efforts have brought about genuine progress in clarifying and addressing it. A useful starting point is to distinguish between two different aspects of the issue: the intellectual and the emotional. The intellectual problem concerns whether it is possible to give a rational account of how God and evil could coexist. The emotional problem, by contrast, deals with how to comfort those who are actually suffering and how to respond to the visceral sense of offense at a God who allows such pain. The intellectual dimension falls properly within the work of philosophers, while the emotional dimension belongs more to the realm of pastoral care and counseling. Confusing the two can be unhelpful:

philosophical responses to the intellectual problem may feel cold or insensitive to someone in the midst of hardship, while pastoral responses to the emotional problem may seem inadequate as a rational explanation when the question is considered abstractly. With that distinction in place, it is best to begin by examining the intellectual side of the problem of evil.

Further clarification is useful at this stage. Philosophers today recognize that the intellectual problem of evil comes in several distinct forms, often labeled “deductive,” “inductive,” “logical,” “probabilistic,” or “evidential.” While there is no single, universally agreed-upon taxonomy, it is nonetheless helpful to focus on two broad ways of framing the issue: as an **internal** problem or as an **external** problem.

The internal version arises when the challenge is posed using assumptions or commitments that a Christian theist either does, or reasonably should, accept as part of their faith. In this case, the charge is that the Christian worldview is inconsistent with itself—that its own claims generate a contradiction. By contrast, the external version appeals to premises that do not flow directly from Christian belief but are nonetheless regarded as broadly credible or true. Here the intent is not to show incoherence within Christianity but rather to argue that, given the existence of evil, the Christian account of reality is unlikely or implausible.

The internal problem of evil itself divides into two main forms: a **logical** version and a **probabilistic** version. In the logical form, the critic claims that the existence of both God and evil is outright impossible. Just as there cannot be a possible world in which an irresistible force meets an immovable object, so too there cannot be one in which an all-powerful, perfectly good God coexists with evil. Since Christianity, unlike some other traditions such as strands of Hindu thought, affirms both the reality of evil and the reality of such a God, the argument concludes that the

position collapses into contradiction. Evil undeniably exists—therefore, God does not.

The probabilistic form softens the claim. Here, the objector concedes that it is not strictly impossible for God and evil to exist together. Instead, the charge is that it is highly unlikely. The Christian believer, then, is saddled with two commitments—God's existence and the reality of evil—that together appear improbable.

The logical version rests on the alleged incompatibility of two claims:

1. An omnipotent, wholly good God exists.
2. Evil exists.

For centuries this was the standard framing of the issue, stretching back at least to Epicurus, and still regarded by David Hume as unresolved in his own day. Even into the mid-twentieth century, philosophers such as J. L. Mackie advanced the argument in this form.

It was Alvin Plantinga's work that decisively reshaped the discussion. Plantinga distinguished between a *theodicy* and a *defense*. A theodicy offers a positive account of why God permits the evils that exist; a defense, by contrast, aims only to show that the atheist has not succeeded in demonstrating a contradiction between God and evil. The latter strategy does not explain suffering; it merely blocks the inference that evil and God are logically incompatible.

Plantinga argued that the logical version of the problem of evil places an unsustainable burden of proof on the skeptic. On the face of it, statements (1) and (2) are not contradictory. For them to be implicitly inconsistent, further hidden premises are required—most commonly:

3. If God is omnipotent, he can create any world he chooses.

4. If God is omnibenevolent, he would prefer a world without evil to one with evil.

The skeptic reasons as follows: since God is all-powerful, he could have created a world of free creatures who always choose rightly. Such a world, devoid of moral evil, should be within God's power. Likewise, he could have ensured a world without natural disasters, disease, or suffering. Such a flawless world, it is argued, would have been preferable, and a truly good God would certainly have chosen it. Hume's famous challenge presses the point: if God is willing but not able, he is weak; if able but not willing, he is malicious; if both able and willing, whence then evil?

Plantinga counters with his well-known *free will defense*. He maintains that if libertarian freedom is even possible, then assumption (3) is not necessarily true. It is logically impossible to *make* someone do something *freely*. That is as logically incoherent as a round square or a married bachelor. God's omnipotence does not extend to logical contradictions, and causing someone to freely choose a given action is precisely such a contradiction. Genuine freedom means choices are not predetermined, even by God. Therefore, although there may be worlds that are logically possible, they may not be *feasible* for God to create—since in every such world containing free beings, at least some of them choose wrongly. If so, then every feasible world involving free creatures will contain evil. In that case, evil results not from God's failure, but from the free actions of creatures.

As for natural evil, Plantinga suggests that it could stem from the freedom of nonhuman agents such as demons. One may find this explanation improbable or fanciful, but improbability is irrelevant at this stage. All that matters is that such a scenario is *possible*, which is sufficient to defeat the claim of logical incompatibility. Hence assumption (3) is undermined.

What of assumption (4), that a good God must prefer a world without evil to one with it? This too is not necessarily true. In human experience we often permit or impose temporary suffering to secure greater goods: parents allow hardships or discipline their children in order to promote maturity, responsibility, or growth. The skeptic might insist that an all-powerful being would not be so limited. He could bring about the greater good directly, without allowing any suffering. But clearly, given human freedom of the will, that may not be possible. Certain goods, for example, moral virtues, are only possible through the free cooperation of people. By analogy, God may permit pain for morally sufficient reasons—whether to strengthen individuals, to test them, or to achieve outcomes beyond our present grasp. In such cases, allowing evil does not negate God's goodness.

Thus, both hidden premises fail to hold as necessary truths. The logical argument that God and evil cannot coexist is therefore invalid, and the supposed contradiction dissolves.

Advocates of the logical problem of evil sometimes attempt a renewed line of attack. They may concede that God's existence is not logically incompatible with evil in the abstract, but insist that it is incompatible with the **extent and severity** of the evil we actually observe. The claim here is that while occasional instances of suffering might be reconcilable with God's goodness and power, the sheer volume and brutality of evil in the real world—innocents tortured and killed in horrific ways, for example—cannot be squared with such a God.

The underlying assumption of this argument is that God cannot possibly have morally sufficient reasons for permitting the kinds and quantity of evil that exist. But that assumption is far from self-evident. Consider first the sheer amount of evil. Despite the tragedies of life, many still find existence meaningful and worth living. Indeed, even in hardship people generally hope for improvement and cling to life. This suggests that the world, on balance, may

contain far more good than evil. It is also possible that, given the constraints of creaturely freedom, every feasible world available to God that contained less evil would also have contained less good. In that case, the actual world might be the best "trade-off" between good and evil that God could actualize.

The same reasoning applies to the types of evil. God may allow even the most appalling atrocities for reasons tied to higher goods we cannot fully grasp. The objection that God could have created a world with fewer atrocities misses the point: if such a world would also have lacked certain overriding goods, then it may not have been feasible for God to actualize it.

At this stage, skeptics may protest that such scenarios sound highly improbable. But that confuses two distinct problems. The task of rebutting the *logical* problem of evil does not require offering a likely explanation, only a *possible* one. The challenge was to show that God and the world's evil cannot logically coexist; demonstrating that they *can* coexist—even under a merely possible scenario—undermines the objection. And no atheist has succeeded in proving that God could not, under any circumstances, have morally sufficient reasons for allowing the evils we see.

Plantinga presses this point further. Not only has the atheist failed to prove inconsistency, but we can in fact show consistency. A possible explanation is as follows:

5. God could not have created a world containing as much good as the actual world with any less evil (in both quantity and quality), and God has morally sufficient reasons for permitting the evil that exists.

Here "could not" is understood in terms of feasibility, not bare logical possibility. While there may be possible worlds with more good and less evil, such worlds may not be

feasible for God, given the counterfactuals of creaturely freedom. If (5) is even possibly true, then the existence of God and the existence of evil are logically compatible.

One might reply that (5) is only *epistemically* possible—that we cannot rule it out, though it may not be metaphysically possible. Perhaps, in every possible world where God exists, the relevant truths about creaturely freedom would allow him to actualize a better world than ours. This counter-hypothesis, however, is exceedingly speculative, and in fact most philosophers—including many atheists—acknowledge that (5) is at least metaphysically possible.

Ultimately, the burden of proof lies with the atheist, since it is the atheist who claims that a contradiction exists between theism and evil. That is a daunting burden, and one that has never been successfully carried. As a result, most contemporary philosophers—whether theists, atheists, or agnostics—now agree that the logical version of the problem of evil has been decisively answered.

When we shift from the logical to the **probabilistic problem of evil**, however, the challenge becomes more pressing. Even if it is possible, as argued earlier, that a good God and evil coexist, it still seems highly *implausible*. Explanations that attribute all natural evil to demonic activity, for instance, strike most as fanciful. And surely God could have reduced at least some of the world's suffering without thereby reducing the overall good. The sheer number of seemingly pointless or gratuitous evils makes it hard to see how God could have adequate reasons for allowing them. Thus, the objection concludes, while not impossible, God's existence is improbable given the realities of evil.

This line of argument is undeniably stronger than the logical version. Its conclusion is more modest—claiming improbability rather than impossibility—which makes it

correspondingly easier to defend. How should the theist respond? Four considerations help frame the answer.

1. Probabilities are always relative to background information.
The key question is: improbable relative to *what*? To illustrate, imagine Joe, a college student. Suppose 90 percent of college students drink beer. On that information alone, it seems highly probable that Joe drinks beer. But if we learn that Joe attends Biola University, where 90 percent of students *do not* drink beer, the probability shifts dramatically. The moral: probability judgments depend on the reference class or background knowledge employed.

Now apply this to the case of God. If we look only at the fact of evil, it is unsurprising that God's existence appears improbable relative to that narrow slice of evidence. It would indeed be an extraordinary achievement if theists could prove that, relative to the evidence of evil *alone*, God's existence is probable. But the Christian is under no obligation to meet that standard. Instead, he will insist that the full range of relevant evidence be considered: arguments from the origin and fine-tuning of the universe, the existence of objective moral values, the concept of a maximally great being, historical evidence for Jesus and the resurrection, reports of miracles, and personal religious experience. When evil is weighed alongside this broader evidential base, the balance, the theist argues, tilts toward theism—or at least does not tip against it.

Indeed, a theist may even concede that, taken in isolation, the reality of evil makes God's existence improbable. But once the total body of evidence is taken into account, the scales may well favor belief in God.

2. Our epistemic limitations prevent confident probability judgments about God's reasons.
Whether God's existence appears improbable in light of evil depends crucially on how likely it is that God lacks morally sufficient reasons for allowing evil. And here we

run into a fundamental problem: as finite, limited creatures, we are in no position to assess such probabilities with any confidence. Human beings are bounded by space and time, by restricted intelligence and insight, whereas God, as transcendent and sovereign, views history from beginning to end and orders events providentially so that his purposes are ultimately realized through the free decisions of creatures. To accomplish such purposes, God may need to permit certain evils along the way. What strikes us as pointless or gratuitous may, from God's broader vantage point, serve a necessary role within a much larger plan.

An analogy from chaos theory illustrates the point. Scientists studying complex systems such as weather have discovered that tiny inputs can produce enormous long-term effects—the proverbial butterfly flapping its wings in West Africa could contribute to the formation of a hurricane in the Atlantic. Yet no observer of the butterfly could predict such consequences. Likewise, the tragic murder of an innocent person or the death of a child from leukemia could set in motion ripple effects through history whose redemptive or morally sufficient justification would only become evident generations later, or even in another part of the world.

Our earlier discussion of divine middle knowledge highlighted that only an omniscient mind could weave together the incalculable contingencies of a world of free agents in order to achieve foreknown purposes. Consider the Allied victory on D-Day: countless factors and free decisions had to align for that outcome to occur. If coordinating a single event of that magnitude already involves innumerable variables, how much more complex would be God's governance of the whole of history? We simply cannot estimate what moral or natural evils might be entailed in order for God to achieve his aims, or what goods might justify the permission of certain sufferings in our lives.

This appeal is not a cheap invocation of mystery but a sober acknowledgment of cognitive limitation. Interestingly, critics of utilitarianism make the same point: it is impossible for us to calculate with certainty which of our actions will maximize happiness or minimize suffering in the long run. Choices that appear disastrous in the short term may prove to have long-term benefits, while seemingly beneficial actions may sow the seeds of greater harm. If this is true on the human scale, how much more when contemplating divine providence over history as a whole? In light of our limitations, it is futile to claim with confidence that God probably has no morally sufficient reasons for permitting the evils we observe.

3. Christian doctrines raise the probability of God's coexistence with evil.
Another response is to note that Christian theism contains specific doctrines that, if true, would make the presence of evil less surprising. The objection assumes that if God exists, evil should be improbable. But if we include within our background knowledge the teachings of Christianity itself, the probability shifts. Formally, if God exists *together with* certain Christian doctrines, then the likelihood of evil is greater than it would be under bare theism:

$$Pr(\text{Evil} \mid \text{God} \ \& \ \text{Christian Doctrines}) > Pr(\text{Evil} \mid \text{God}).$$

This is not question-begging, since the Christian is not taking "Evil exists" as a hypothesis. Rather, the Christian appeals to features of the faith—such as doctrines of the fall, human freedom, the role of suffering, or eschatological hope—that help explain why evil is not so improbable given God's existence. Since the problem is framed as an internal difficulty for Christians, it is entirely legitimate for the Christian to draw upon the resources of the Christian worldview in crafting a reply. From this vantage point, the probabilistic problem of evil is actually easier to answer within Christianity than within a minimalist theism that

lacks these explanatory resources. Four doctrines, in particular, are especially relevant.

First, the ultimate purpose of life is not worldly happiness but the knowledge of God.
One of the reasons the problem of evil can feel so perplexing is that people often assume God's chief aim must be to ensure human happiness in this life, as though his role were to provide a comfortable environment for his creatures. On the Christian view, however, this is mistaken. Human beings are not God's "pets," and happiness is not the final goal. Instead, the central purpose of life is to come to know God, a good that ultimately leads to true and everlasting fulfillment.

From this perspective, many forms of suffering that look pointless when measured against human comfort may, in fact, be significant in deepening trust, dependence, and knowledge of God—whether in the life of the sufferer or those around them. How that suffering functions will, of course, depend on the human response: one may react with bitterness and rejection of God, or with faith and endurance.

Theologian Martyn Lloyd-Jones once expressed this perspective clearly, insisting that history itself can only be properly understood in light of the kingdom of God. According to Lloyd-Jones, God has been at work from the beginning to establish his kingdom, calling people out of the world into it. Every event, however bewildering, must be judged by its bearing on that kingdom. Personal and global hardships alike, he argued, should prompt us not to doubt God's goodness but to ask: *What is God teaching me through this? What relevance does this event have to his eternal purposes?*

History bears this out. Time and again, moral and natural evils have become the soil for spiritual growth. For instance:

- **China**: During Mao's Cultural Revolution, an estimated 20 million perished, and Christians endured brutal persecution. Yet this very persecution purified and indigenized the Church. Since the late 1970s, the Church in China has experienced unprecedented growth, with tens of millions of believers by 1990. Mao Zedong, ironically, became an unwitting catalyst for one of history's greatest Christian revivals.
- **El Salvador**: A civil war, natural disasters, and economic collapse left more than 80% of the population in poverty. Amid suffering and bitterness, evangelical Christianity grew from 2.3% of the population in 1960 to about 20% by the late twentieth century.
- **Ethiopia**: Waves of famine, war, and persecution devastated the nation, claiming millions of lives. Yet out of this crucible, the Church grew rapidly—from less than 1% of the population in 1960 to an estimated 13% by 1990.

Examples could be multiplied. Human history is both a record of immense suffering and of the advance of God's kingdom. As missiologist Patrick Johnstone has observed, we are witnessing the largest global turning to God in history—growth that may be intimately connected with the presence of suffering.

Second, humanity lives in a state of rebellion against God.
Another key doctrine is that human beings have turned away from God's rule and sought independence from him. Rather than worship and obey, we pursue our own way, resulting in alienation from God, moral guilt, and spiritual blindness. The evils we see in human society are therefore not surprising to Christians—they are the predictable outworking of human sinfulness.

Scripture teaches that God has "given humanity over" to the sin it has freely chosen (Romans 1:24, 26, 28). In this

sense, God does not always intervene to restrain human wickedness but allows its consequences to unfold. This deepens human responsibility while also exposing our desperate need for forgiveness and moral transformation. Moreover, Christian teaching holds that rebellion is not limited to humankind alone. There exists a realm of spiritual beings in revolt against God—malevolent powers bent on undermining his purposes. In their influence over creation, Christians find part of the explanation for the extent and intensity of moral evil in the world. From this vantage point, the pervasiveness of evil is not unexpected but entirely consistent with a universe in rebellion against its Creator.

Third, God's purposes extend beyond this life into eternity.
From the standpoint of Christian theism, this earthly life is not the whole story. It is only the narrow entryway to the vast expanse of eternity. God promises everlasting life to those who trust in Christ, and it is within that eternal perspective that present suffering must be understood. When God permits his children to endure terrible pain in this life, it is always under the promise of a heavenly reward that surpasses all comprehension.

The apostle Paul exemplifies this outlook. His life was marked by relentless hardship—both moral and natural evil—including "afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger" (2 Cor 6:4–5). Yet he could still write with conviction:

"So we do not lose heart. … For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, because we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen; for the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal." (2 Cor 4:16–18, RSV)

Paul was not trivializing suffering—he knew it firsthand. Rather, he placed it against the backdrop of eternity.

Compared to the infinite span of everlasting joy, the worst of human sufferings shrink to a vanishing point. For that reason he could describe them as “slight” and “momentary.” It may even be that certain evils yield no discernible earthly good at all; yet God may permit them so that those who endure in faith will receive overwhelming reward in the life to come.

Fourth, the knowledge of God is an incomparable good. Paul’s imagery also illustrates this final point. He envisions a set of scales: on one side, the cumulative weight of earthly suffering; on the other, the glory of knowing God. The balance is not even close. To know God—the fountain of infinite goodness and love—is a good so great that it dwarfs every evil. This relationship with God is the true fulfillment of human existence, and no suffering, however dreadful, can outweigh it. Thus, even the one who suffers deeply can still truthfully affirm, “God has been good to me,” simply because he knows God.

These four doctrines, taken together, significantly increase the probability that God and evil coexist. They help to neutralize the force of the probabilistic objection by situating suffering within the larger framework of Christian belief. Even if, when considered in isolation, evil makes God’s existence seem improbable, that does not settle the matter. Positive evidence for God—philosophical arguments, historical claims, religious experience—must also be weighed. In addition, we are not in a good epistemic position to declare that God could not have sufficient reasons for allowing evil. And finally, Christian doctrines themselves provide a framework in which the coexistence of God and evil is not surprising.

For these reasons, the probabilistic problem of evil, while formidable, falls short of showing that belief in God is irrational or improbable.

If the problem of evil falters as an internal challenge to Christian theism, does it nonetheless resurface as an **external** problem? This has been the focus of much recent debate among philosophers. The internal versions we examined sought to show that two Christian beliefs—that God exists and that evil exists—are either inconsistent or improbable when taken together. Most contemporary non-theists have now moved away from that approach. Instead, they contend that the existence of *apparently pointless* or *unnecessary* evils provides evidence against the existence of God. In this formulation, the conflict is said to be between the following two claims:

6. An omnipotent, omnibenevolent God exists.
7. Gratuitous evil exists.

The reason this constitutes an external problem is that Christians are not committed to affirming (7). Their worldview requires belief in the reality of evil, but not in the existence of evil that is *truly gratuitous*—evil without any sufficient justification. Thus the external argument takes the following form:

8. If God exists, gratuitous evil does not exist.
9. Gratuitous evil exists.
10. Therefore, God does not exist.

The entire debate turns on the warrant for premise (9). A theist might readily concede that much of the evil we see *appears* gratuitous. But to move from *appearance* to *reality* is a major step. As we have already seen in discussing the probabilistic problem of evil, our limited cognitive position makes such probability judgments extremely uncertain. Our inability to identify a morally sufficient reason for a given evil is scant evidence that no such reason exists. A God endowed with omniscience—and, in particular, with middle knowledge of counterfactuals—could well have reasons hidden from our finite perspective.

Here the broader evidential context once again comes into play. The crucial question, ironically, is not whether gratuitous evil exists, but whether God exists. For if God exists, then by definition gratuitous evil does not. Thus, the theist is equally entitled to construct the following argument:

11. If God exists, gratuitous evil does not exist.
12. God exists.
13. Therefore, gratuitous evil does not exist.

In this way, the same conditional premise (11) can serve as the basis for diametrically opposed conclusions. The atheist employs it in a *modus tollens* argument; the theist in a *modus ponens*. The dispute reduces to which premise—(9) or (12)—enjoys greater warrant.

As philosopher Daniel Howard-Snyder has observed, the problem of evil is only a "problem" for the theist who accepts its premises and inferences but has weak grounds for theism itself. For the theist whose belief in God rests on stronger evidence, the supposed problem of evil does not succeed in overturning that foundation.

The same considerations apply to other versions of the external problem of evil that have been developed in contemporary philosophy. For example, Paul Draper has argued that naturalism is more probable than theism given the evolution of biological organisms and the distribution of pleasure and pain in the world. His case depends on three key probability assumptions, each of which is questionable.

First, Draper assumes that naturalism and theism are equally probable relative to our background knowledge ($Pr(N) = Pr(T)$). Yet, as we saw in earlier discussions of the cosmological and teleological arguments (chs. 25–26), this is not at all obvious. Second, Draper contends that the distribution of pleasure and pain is more likely on

naturalism plus evolution than on theism plus evolution ($Pr(P\&E \mid N) > Pr(P\&E \mid T)$). But again, our epistemic limitations render such probability judgments highly suspect. Third, Draper argues that evolution is more probable given naturalism than given theism ($Pr(E \mid N) > Pr(E \mid T)$), since on naturalism evolution is the only mechanism available, while theism allows alternatives. But what Draper's reasoning actually supports is a different claim: that evolution is more probable relative to naturalism *and the existence of biological organisms* than relative to theism *and the existence of biological organisms* ($Pr(E \mid N \ \& \ B) > Pr(E \mid T \ \& \ B)$). Yet, as our earlier teleological considerations showed, the existence of life itself is staggeringly improbable on naturalism alone. Indeed, if naturalism were true, the expectation should be of a lifeless universe. By contrast, theism provides a foundation for expecting biological life, and hence evolution. Without his three critical probability assumptions, Draper's evidential case from evil collapses.

Moreover, even premise (8)—that if God exists, then gratuitous evil does not exist—is not as secure as it may seem. Some theists have argued that while God could eliminate particular evils without diminishing overall goodness, a world entirely free of gratuitous evils might not be as good overall. Once divine middle knowledge is factored in, it may be that only in worlds containing what appear to us as gratuitous evils do the relevant counterfactuals of creaturely freedom hold true, thereby enabling God to bring the optimal number of persons freely into relationship with himself. In such a case, the evils are not gratuitous after all, but serve the greater good of salvation. But this only underscores how difficult it is for the atheist to prove that any evil is truly gratuitous. For how could one, from a finite standpoint, judge what does or does not contribute to God's redemptive purposes across history?

A final, decisive point can also be made: the very existence of evil provides evidence *for* God's existence. As argued in the axiological case for theism, it is plausible that objective

moral values cannot exist without God. If so, then evil—understood as the objective reality of certain acts or states being wrong—entails the reality of objective values, which in turn entails God's existence. The reasoning can be put formally:

14. If God does not exist, objective moral values do not exist.
15. Evil exists.
16. Therefore, objective moral values exist. (from 15, by definition of evil)
17. Therefore, God exists. (from 14 and 16)

The atheist himself, in appealing to the problem of evil, implicitly affirms the reality of objective moral values by calling certain evils *truly evil*. But this affirmation requires a transcendent foundation, which theism uniquely provides. Thus, rather than undermining belief in God, the very reality of evil confirms it.

In light of these considerations, the intellectual problem of evil—whether framed in internal or external terms—fails as a decisive objection to God's existence. Logical formulations have been decisively answered, probabilistic arguments falter under scrutiny, and appeals to gratuitous evil collapse once the full scope of evidence and the resources of Christian theism are brought to bear. Indeed, the existence of evil, far from disproving God, may itself serve as part of the evidence that God is real.

Of course, when we say the problem of evil has been "solved," we mean that it has been *philosophically resolved*. Such reasoning, however, often brings little comfort to someone in the grip of raw, personal suffering. This introduces us to the second dimension of the issue: the **emotional problem of evil**.

For many, the difficulty is not intellectual but visceral. They are wounded, angry, or bitter toward a God who would allow such pain—whether their own or that of others. Philosophical arguments are of no interest; what they feel is a deep refusal to trust or acknowledge a God who permits suffering. Dostoyevsky's *Brothers Karamazov* illustrates this vividly. Ivan Karamazov never refutes Christian responses to evil; he simply rejects the God they defend. "I would rather remain with my unavenged suffering and unsatisfied indignation, even if I am wrong," he declares. His atheism is not one of refutation but of rejection.

What, then, can be said—or better, *done*—for those struggling under the emotional weight of evil? Often the most important thing is not a set of words but the presence of a compassionate friend: someone who listens, weeps, and bears the burden with them. Still, there are times when counsel is needed, and we ourselves may confront this problem personally. Does Christian theism have the resources to address it?

The answer is yes. Christianity proclaims not a detached deity or impersonal force, but a loving Father who enters into the suffering of his creation. Alvin Plantinga puts it powerfully:

"As the Christian sees things, God does not stand idly by, coolly observing the suffering of his creatures. He enters into and shares our suffering. He endures the anguish of seeing his son, the second person of the Trinity, consigned to the bitterly cruel and shameful death of the cross. Some theologians claim that God cannot suffer. I believe they are wrong. God's capacity for suffering, I believe, is proportional to his greatness; it exceeds our capacity for suffering in the same measure as his capacity for knowledge exceeds ours. Christ was prepared to endure the agonies of hell itself; and God, the Lord of the universe, was

prepared to endure the suffering consequent upon his son's humiliation and death. He was prepared to accept this suffering in order to overcome sin, and death, and the evils that afflict our world, and to confer on us a life more glorious than we can imagine. So we don't know why God permits evil; we do know, however, that he was prepared to suffer on our behalf, to accept suffering of which we can form no conception."

At the center of the Christian faith stands the cross. Jesus, though innocent, embraced unimaginable suffering—not for his own sake but for ours. He bore the weight of sin and its consequences out of sheer love. To recognize this is to see evil from a different angle: the problem is no longer *God's* evil but *ours*. The pressing question becomes not how God can justify himself to us, but how we, guilty and broken, can be justified before him.

When God allows us to endure suffering that feels unjust or meaningless, reflection on the cross can give us strength to endure. We are reminded that God himself has walked the path of suffering before us and for us. Thus, paradoxically, while evil may be the most formidable objection to God's existence, God himself is the only ultimate answer to it. Without him, the world is a place of unredeemed anguish; with him, suffering is met with redemption, hope, and the promise of eternal joy in fellowship with him.

In contemporary Western culture, one often encounters a striking attitude toward religion. Many people are comfortable affirming that God exists, yet in our pluralistic context it is considered politically incorrect to claim that God has *uniquely* revealed himself in Jesus. Nevertheless, this is precisely what the New Testament asserts. Paul, for example, reminds his Gentile converts of their former state: *"*Remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and *without God* in the world*"* (Eph. 2:12, ESV).

The opening chapters of Romans develop this theme, emphasizing that humanity as a whole shares this predicament. Paul insists that God's power and divine nature are clearly displayed through creation, leaving people without excuse (1:20). Moreover, God has inscribed his moral law on the human conscience, holding all morally accountable (2:15). Although eternal life is offered to those who respond appropriately to this general revelation (2:7), the sobering reality is that people consistently suppress the truth, ignore their Creator, and break his moral law (1:21–32). His conclusion is stark: all people are under the dominion of sin (3:9–12).

Worse, Paul says that nor can anyone save themselves by righteous living (3:19–20). Yet God has provided a *remedy*: through the atoning death of Jesus Christ, the demands of divine justice have been satisfied, opening the way for reconciliation (3:21–26). Salvation, Paul insists, is now freely available as a gift to be received through faith. The New Testament's logic is unmistakable: because sin is universal and Christ's death uniquely atones for it, salvation can be found in *no one else*. The apostles declared, *"There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved"* (Acts 4:12).

This claim—that salvation comes through Christ alone—was as scandalous in the polytheistic Roman Empire as it is in today's pluralistic West. Early Christians were persecuted, tortured, and even executed for refusing to adopt a pluralistic stance and honor the Roman gods. With time, however, Christianity grew to dominate the empire, and the scandal diminished. By the medieval period, thinkers like Augustine and Aquinas regarded the universality of the Church as one of its marks. For them, it seemed unthinkable that such a vast and enduring institution could be built upon falsehood.

The unraveling of this exclusive doctrine began with the so-called "Expansion of Europe," the age of exploration between roughly 1450 and 1750. Through the voyages of Marco Polo, Columbus, Magellan, and others, Europeans discovered entire civilizations that had never heard of Christianity. This realization had two profound effects. First, it relativized religious belief. Christianity was no longer seen as a universal faith but as one tradition largely confined to Western Europe—a small corner of the world. Each culture appeared to possess its own religion suited to its needs, casting doubt on any single faith's claim to universality. Second, Christianity's assertion of being the only path to salvation began to appear harsh and unjust. Enlightenment figures like Voltaire ridiculed the idea that millions in places like China should be damned for failing to believe in a Christ they had never encountered.

Today, global immigration and instantaneous communication have made humanity's religious diversity more visible than ever. As the world has become a "global village," religious pluralism—the conviction that there are many valid paths to God—has reemerged as the reigning assumption of our culture.

But what exactly is the difficulty raised by humanity's religious diversity—and for whom is it really a problem? In the literature, the pressure is almost always placed on those

who affirm that Christ is the only way to God. Let us call this conviction **Christian particularism**. The existence of many religions is often taken to imply that some form of pluralism must be true, and the debate quickly shifts to which version of pluralism is most defensible. But why assume that Christian particularism cannot withstand the challenge of religious diversity? What, precisely, is supposed to be the problem?

When one examines the arguments offered on behalf of pluralism, many of them turn out to be classic examples of faulty reasoning. A common claim, for instance, is that religious particularism is arrogant or even immoral, since it requires one to view those who disagree as mistaken. But this is simply a textbook case of the **ad hominem fallacy**—attempting to discredit a view by attacking the character of its proponents. Whether particularists are arrogant or immoral is irrelevant to the truth of their position. Even if every Christian particularist were guilty of such flaws, that would not make the view false.

Moreover, there is no reason to think that arrogance or immorality necessarily accompany particularism. Imagine someone who has sincerely sought the truth about ultimate reality, has become convinced that Christianity is true, and has embraced faith as an undeserved gift of grace. Is such a person arrogant and immoral simply for believing what they are persuaded is true? What alternative could they take but to believe the truth as they see it?

Even more telling, this charge is self-defeating. For the pluralist also maintains that his perspective is correct and that all particularistic religions are mistaken. By the same reasoning, then, pluralism itself would be guilty of arrogance and immorality. The objection therefore proves too much, cutting equally against the very position it was meant to defend.

Another common objection is that Christian particularism cannot be correct because religious belief is culturally

conditioned. The reasoning goes like this: if you had been born in Pakistan, you would most likely have been a Muslim; therefore, your present Christian convictions are either false or unjustified.

But once again, this line of argument commits a classic error—namely, the **genetic fallacy**. This fallacy attempts to invalidate a belief by pointing to the way it originated. Yet the truth of a belief is independent of how one came to hold it. That your convictions are influenced by time and place says nothing about whether they are true. Consider: if you had been born in ancient Greece, you probably would have believed that the sun revolves around the earth. Does that mean your current belief that the earth revolves around the sun is false or unjustified? Clearly not.

And just as before, the pluralist's objection turns back on himself. For had the pluralist been born in Pakistan, he would most likely have been a religious particularist rather than a pluralist. By his own reasoning, then, his commitment to pluralism is nothing more than a product of his late–twentieth-century Western upbringing, and is therefore itself false or unjustified.

So, many of the popular objections raised against Christian particularism turn out to be fairly weak. But we must not think that, because pluralists often appeal to fallacious reasoning, pluralism itself poses no serious challenge. By clearing away these superficial arguments, we can finally get to the real issue that lies beneath the surface.

At its core, the real problem concerns the destiny of those outside one's particular religious tradition. Christian particularism insists that Christ is the only doorway to eternal life—a claim that pluralists find morally intolerable. Few lives illustrate this struggle better than that of John Hick. Hick began his career as a relatively conservative Christian theologian, even publishing a book titled *Christianity at the Centre*. But as his study of world religions deepened and he came to know many of their

devout and virtuous adherents, he found it increasingly difficult to believe that such people were excluded from salvation. The implications were clear: if salvation came solely through Christ's incarnation and atoning death, then these individuals were lost. To resolve this tension, Hick concluded that Jesus could no longer remain at the center.

But so long as the doctrines of incarnation and atonement were upheld, Christ could not be pushed to the margins. Hick therefore took the radical step of editing *The Myth of God Incarnate*, arguing that these defining Christian doctrines are not literal truths but symbolic myths. In his own words:

"The problem which has come to the surface in the encounter of Christianity with the other world religions is this: If Jesus was literally God incarnate, and if it is by his death alone that men can be saved, and by their response to him alone that they can appropriate that salvation, then the only doorway to eternal life is Christian faith. It would follow from this that the large majority of the human race so far have not been saved. But is it credible that the loving God and Father of all men has decreed that only those born within one particular thread of human history shall be saved?"

Here, then, is the central challenge raised by the reality of religious diversity: the fate of those who stand outside the Christian faith.

But what, exactly, is the problem supposed to be with holding that salvation comes only through Christ? Is the objection simply that a loving God would never send people to hell? That cannot be the whole story. Scripture affirms that God genuinely desires the salvation of all. *"The Lord is… not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance"* (2 Pet. 3:9, ESV). Similarly, Paul writes that God *"desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth"* (1 Tim. 2:4, NASB). Through the prophet Ezekiel, God declares:

"Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, says the Lord God, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live? … For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord God; so turn, and live.… Say to them, As I live, says the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways; for why will you die?" (Ezek. 18:23, 32; 33:11).

Here God pleads with people to abandon their self-destructive path and receive life.

In that sense, it is not God who "sends" anyone to hell. His desire is that all be saved, and he actively draws people toward himself. But if someone freely and knowingly rejects Christ's sacrifice for sin, then God ultimately allows that decision to stand. He grants them what they have chosen. Their eternal destiny lies in their own hands: to live with God or apart from him. Those who are lost are self-condemned, separating themselves from the God who longs to save them. And Scripture portrays God as grieving over their loss.

A pluralist might respond by conceding that freedom entails some will reject God, but then press a different objection: is it just for God to condemn people to eternal punishment? After all, even terrible crimes—say, the atrocities of Nazi torturers—seem to merit only a finite penalty. If so, then hell should be finite as well. It might function as a kind of purgatory, lasting only as long as is proportionate to each person's wrongdoing, until all are eventually purified and welcomed into heaven. Ironically, on this view, the doctrine of eternal hell is incompatible not with God's love, but with his justice.

Yet this objection falters in at least two ways.

First, it conflates *every sin* with *all sins together*. We might grant that each individual sin deserves only a finite punishment. But it does not follow that the cumulative weight of all sins also warrants only finite punishment. If a person commits sin endlessly, the guilt compounds without end. And in the afterlife, those estranged from God may persist in rejecting him, continuing to sin and so continually accruing guilt. In that sense, hell becomes self-perpetuating: each sin has a finite consequence, but because sinning continues forever, so does punishment.

Second, why assume that each sin has only finite significance? Ordinary sins like lying, theft, or adultery might be finite in scope, but these are not ultimately what exclude someone from God. For Christ has already borne the penalty for such sins, and forgiveness is freely available to all who receive him. The decisive sin—the one that separates eternally—is the refusal to accept Christ's atoning work. This rejection is of an entirely different order. It spurns God's provision for reconciliation, repudiates his grace, and amounts to a rejection of God himself. In light of who God is—the infinite source of truth and goodness—the rejection of him is plausibly a sin of infinite gravity. Such a choice could justly incur an infinite consequence.

For this reason, hell should not primarily be viewed as punishment for a list of finite wrongs, but rather as the just outcome of a single, ultimate decision: the willful rejection of God and his salvation. Thus, the real difficulty with Christian particularism is not merely the doctrine of hell. The issue runs deeper.

Perhaps, then, the real problem is thought to be this: a loving God would not consign people to hell simply because they were uninformed or misinformed about Christ. After all, how could someone who has never heard of Jesus—or has only been presented with a distorted caricature of him—be expected to place saving faith in him?

But once again, this does not strike at the heart of the issue. For according to Scripture, God does not judge those who have never heard the gospel on the basis of whether they have consciously placed faith in Christ. Instead, he judges them in light of the revelation he has already given in nature and conscience.

Paul makes this clear in Romans 2:7: *"To those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life."* In other words, those who respond to God's general revelation with perseverance and sincerity—seeking forgiveness through the witness of conscience and casting themselves upon the mercy of the Creator revealed in nature—may indeed receive salvation. This is not to suggest that anyone can be saved apart from Christ. Rather, it is to say that the benefits of Christ's atoning death can be applied to individuals who lack conscious knowledge of him. We see parallels to this in the Old Testament. Figures such as Job and Melchizedek were not Jews and did not belong to the covenant people of Israel. Yet they clearly enjoyed genuine fellowship with God. Their salvation, like ours, was possible only through Christ, even though they had no direct awareness of him. In the same way, it is at least conceivable that there are "modern-day Jobs" among the unreached today—men and women who, responding faithfully to the light they have, are graciously brought into God's saving purposes through Christ.

Nevertheless, the sobering testimony of the New Testament is that humanity at large fails to live up even to the more modest standard of general revelation. People suppress the truth in unrighteousness (Rom. 1:18–23), ignore God's witness in creation, and disregard the voice of conscience. Consequently, there is little reason to be optimistic about large numbers being saved solely through their response to general revelation. Still, the point stands: salvation is universally accessible through God's self-disclosure in nature and conscience. Therefore, the problem raised by religious diversity cannot be reduced to the claim that God

would unjustly condemn those who were simply uninformed or misinformed about Christ.

It seems, then, that the real challenge is not simply about hell, nor about ignorance of Christ, but something deeper: if God is truly all-knowing, then he foresaw exactly who would freely embrace the gospel and who would not. And here some very difficult questions emerge.

1. Why did God not bring the gospel to those he knew would accept it if only they heard?
Consider, for instance, a young woman living in the Himalayan mountains centuries ago, long before the message of Christ ever reached her village. Call her *Lhamo*. As she gazes at the majesty of the mountains and the heavens above, she senses that such grandeur must be the handiwork of a divine Creator. Looking inward, her conscience tells her that human beings ought to live in harmony and kindness, honoring the One who made them.

But instead of worshiping the Creator and living in love toward others, Lhamo turns to local deities and superstitions, and she mistreats those around her. On that basis, she stands guilty before God for ignoring the witness of nature and conscience. Yet suppose further: had missionaries reached her village in her lifetime, she would have heard the gospel, placed her trust in Christ, and been saved. In that case, her eternal destiny seems to have been determined not by her choice alone, but by sheer accident—by being born in a time and place cut off from the good news. Her condemnation may be just, but is it consistent with the love of God that salvation or damnation could hinge on geography and history?

2. Why did God create the world at all, knowing that multitudes would reject the gospel and be lost?
Since creation itself was a free act of God, why not simply refrain from creating free creatures altogether, rather than permit a world in which so many perish?

3. Why did God not create a world in which everyone freely accepts the gospel?
Surely such a world seems possible, since humans are free either to believe or not believe. Why, then, did God not choose to actualize a world in which all freely embrace Christ and are saved?

These are profound questions. Do they mean that Christianity ultimately portrays God as arbitrary, cruel, or unloving? Or is there a deeper response available?

It is easy for our thinking about such an emotionally charged issue to become clouded by feelings. To consider it fairly, we need to step back and examine the logical structure of the problem more carefully.

The challenge resembles the **logical problem of suffering** discussed earlier: the claim that it is impossible for God to be both all-powerful and all-loving while some people never hear the gospel and are lost. Put more formally, the pluralist suggests that the following two statements are logically inconsistent:

1. God is all-powerful and all-loving.
2. Some people never hear the gospel and are lost.

Clearly, there is no **explicit contradiction** between these two claims. So if they are to be judged inconsistent, there must be hidden premises making the conflict explicit. What might those hidden assumptions be?

It seems the pluralist must be assuming something like this:

3. If God is all-powerful, then he can create a world in which everyone hears the gospel and is freely saved.
4. If God is all-loving, then he prefers a world in which everyone hears the gospel and is freely saved.

If both assumptions are necessarily true, then God both can and would create such a world. But since (2) affirms that some people never hear the gospel and are lost, a contradiction follows.

At first glance, it seems unproblematic to affirm that God could create a world where everyone hears the gospel. But could he ensure that everyone in such a world is **freely saved**? Here lies the difficulty. For if people are genuinely free, there is no guarantee they will all embrace God's grace. It is **logically impossible** to compel someone to freely do something—this is as incoherent as a round square or a married bachelor. Omnipotence does not extend to the logically impossible.

Thus, it may well be that **no feasible world** exists in which everyone who hears the gospel freely accepts it. For all we know, in every possible world of free creatures God could create, some would still reject his saving grace. In that case, assumption (3) is not necessarily true.

But what about the claim that, if God is all-loving, he must prefer a world of universal salvation? Again, not necessarily. Suppose that the only worlds where everyone freely accepts the gospel are sparsely populated worlds with only a few people. If God were to create more people, some of them would inevitably reject him. Must God prefer such tiny worlds over a more populous world in which multitudes are saved, even if others freely choose to be lost? It is far from obvious.

So long as God extends sufficient grace for salvation to all whom he creates, it does not follow that he is less loving for choosing a world rich in redeemed people, even if it also includes some who freely reject him. Thus, assumption (4) is not necessarily true either. Since neither hidden premise is necessarily true, the pluralist's argument fails to demonstrate a contradiction. But we can go further: we can show that it is entirely possible that God is all-powerful,

all-loving, and that many people never hear the gospel and are lost.

As a loving Creator, God's aim would be to maximize the number of the saved while minimizing the number of the lost. In other words, he seeks an **optimal balance**. It is possible that the actual world achieves such a balance: in order to bring about this many people who freely receive salvation, God also had to allow this many who freely reject him. Had God created a world with fewer people in hell, perhaps that world would also have had fewer people in heaven.

And what of those who never hear the gospel but seem as though they might have believed it if they had? How can we know such people exist at all? It is equally possible that God has providentially ordered the world so that all who never hear the gospel are precisely those who, even if they had heard, would still have rejected it. On this view, no one could justly complain on Judgment Day, "If only I had heard the gospel, I would have believed!" For God could rightly respond, "No—you would not have believed, even if you had heard."

Thus, we arrive at a crucial possibility:

5. God has created a world that achieves an optimal balance between the saved and the lost, such that those who never hear the gospel are precisely those who would have rejected it even if they had heard.

So long as (5) is even possibly true, it shows that there is no logical inconsistency between God's power and love on the one hand, and the reality that some people never hear the gospel and are lost on the other.

With this framework in place, we are now in a position to consider possible answers to the three difficult questions raised earlier.

Let's now turn to the three difficult questions, this time in reverse order.

(3) Why didn't God create a world in which everyone freely believes the gospel and is saved?
The simple answer is that such a world may not be *feasible* for God to create. If a world of universal free acceptance were genuinely possible, then, all else being equal, a loving God would surely have created it. But once God chose to create genuinely free creatures, he had to allow for the tragic possibility that some would resist his grace, no matter how earnestly he sought to draw them to himself. True freedom entails that rejection remains a live option. Thus, while God desires universal salvation, the reality of libertarian freedom means that not every possible world achieves it.

(2) Why did God create the world at all, knowing that so many would not believe the gospel and be lost?
The answer lies in God's purpose for creation. He created out of love, with the intention of sharing fellowship with creatures capable of knowing him. This is an incommensurable good. God understood that some would freely spurn his love, but he also knew that countless others would freely embrace his grace. Should those who reject God have the power to prevent others from receiving the blessing of eternal life? To deny creation for the sake of the lost would be, in effect, to let those who hate God exercise veto power over his creative will. Instead, God, in his providence, ordered history in such a way as to achieve the best possible balance—maximizing the number of the saved while minimizing the number of the lost.

(1) Why didn't God bring the gospel to people who he knew would accept it if they heard it, even though they reject the light of general revelation available to them? The answer may be that no such persons exist. In his sovereignty, God has so arranged human history that those who would freely accept the gospel if they heard it, in fact do hear it. As the message spread outward from first-century Palestine, God placed people in its path who would respond positively. Whenever the gospel reaches a region, God ensures that those who would embrace it are given the opportunity. Conversely, those who never hear the gospel are precisely those who, even if they had heard, would not have believed. No one, therefore, is lost merely because of historical or geographical accident. Anyone who genuinely wants salvation—or even would want it under the right conditions—receives the opportunity for it.

These are, of course, *possible* answers, but that is enough to dissolve any claim of logical inconsistency between God's being all-loving and all-powerful on the one hand, and some people never hearing the gospel on the other. The mere possibility shows that the charge of contradiction fails.

What is striking is that these philosophical reflections also resonate strongly with Scripture. In Paul's address to the philosophers of the Areopagus in Athens, he declared:

"The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and ... gives all men life and breath and everything else. From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. For in him we live and move and have our being." (Acts 17:24–28 NIV)

This scriptural testimony aligns almost seamlessly with the conclusions reached by reason: God governs the boundaries

of history and geography so that every person who would respond to his grace does, in fact, have that opportunity.

The pluralist might grant that it is *logically possible* for God to be both all-powerful and all-loving while still allowing some people to never hear the gospel and be lost. Yet, he may object that such a scenario is *improbable*. After all, people typically adopt the religion of the culture in which they are raised. From this observation, the pluralist argues that it is highly likely that many of those who never hear the gospel would, had they been raised in a Christian society, have embraced it and been saved. On this basis, he claims that the hypothesis I have offered is deeply implausible.

At first glance, such reasoning seems persuasive. Surely it would be astronomically improbable if, purely by coincidence, every person who fails to hear the gospel also happens to be someone who would have rejected it even if he had heard. But this misrepresents the claim. The hypothesis is not that such a result arises from chance, but that a sovereign and provident God has *ordered* the world in this way. If God possesses knowledge not only of all actual events but also of how every person would freely respond under any set of circumstances, then it is entirely reasonable to suppose that he has orchestrated history accordingly.

What's crucial to see is that such a providentially ordered world would be outwardly indistinguishable from one in which the circumstances of a person's birth are determined by mere historical accident. It is true that people generally adopt the religion of their culture. It is also true that many born in non-Christian settings would likely have identified as Christian had they been raised in Christian contexts. But that is not the same thing as entering into a saving relationship with God. Nominal or cultural Christianity is not equivalent to genuine, transformative faith in Christ.

Moreover, there are no reliable psychological or sociological indicators that allow us to predict which individuals will truly embrace Christ in faith. Human conversion is not reducible to sociological determinism or personality profiles. For this reason, a world sovereignly governed by God—so that everyone who would freely respond to the gospel does, in fact, hear it—would look no different, on the surface, from a world where the distribution of religions appears to be a matter of cultural happenstance.

Therefore, it is difficult to see how the hypothesis I've defended can reasonably be dismissed as improbable—unless one can show that the very existence of a God endowed with such providential knowledge is itself implausible. But no such demonstration has ever been successfully offered.

Part C – On the Mind-Body Problem

Most people naturally sense that they are not the same as their physical bodies. Throughout history, nearly every culture, unless taught to think otherwise, has believed in some kind of life after death. This conviction tends to arise when a person reflects seriously on the nature of human existence. Within the history of the church, Christian thinkers have generally agreed that Scripture affirms a unified yet dual reality in human beings. On the one hand, people exist as integrated wholes; on the other, they are composed of both an immaterial soul or spirit and a material body, each of which is inherently good.

Although there has been ongoing debate about whether the soul and spirit are identical or distinct, and while the biblical terms for them—*nepes* and *psyché* for soul, *ruah* and *pneuma* for spirit—are used in diverse ways, the overall biblical witness remains clear. The soul or spirit is an immaterial reality distinct from the body (Eccl. 12:7; Matt. 10:28). Death itself is described as the soul's departure from the body (Gen. 35:18; 1 Kings 17:21–22). After death, the soul continues in a disembodied state, awaiting the resurrection of the body (Luke 23:46; 2 Cor. 5:1–10; Phil. 1:21–24; Heb. 12:23). At the same time, Scripture acknowledges that animals, as living beings, also possess souls, though these are different in kind from human souls, and there is little reason to believe that they survive death (Gen. 1:30; Rev. 8:9).

This biblical teaching naturally intersects with a field of philosophy known as the philosophy of mind. At the heart of that discipline is the long-debated mind–body problem, which will now claim our attention.

In some contexts, it is both possible and valuable to distinguish between the mind, the soul, the spirit, and the ego or self. For the purposes of this discussion, however, we will treat these terms interchangeably. Our primary task

is to address two preliminary matters, beginning with a statement of the mind–body problem, which itself raises two central questions. The first is whether consciousness—or mental properties more broadly—can be reduced to the physical, or whether they are irreducibly mental in nature. Closely tied to this is the question of whether the human self, assuming it exists, is purely physical or immaterial. If consciousness and the self are not reducible to the physical, then we must ask whether mind and matter interact and, if they do, how such interaction is possible. The second preliminary matter is to survey the principal options concerning the nature of consciousness and the constitution of the human person. We begin, then, by considering the different positions that attempt to explain the character of consciousness, including experiences such as sensations and thoughts.

There are two primary approaches to understanding mental consciousness and mental properties: physicalism and dualism, each with its own variations. Physicalism maintains, in one form or another, that consciousness is entirely physical. Dualism, by contrast, comes in two distinct forms. The first is mere property dualism, which recognizes that mental properties or consciousness are not physical but are irreducibly mental. However, proponents of mere property dualism contend that consciousness is borne by or located within a physical entity, such as the brain or body. This position is often, though not always, linked with emergentism, the view that once matter reaches a certain level of complexity, a new kind of property—such as painfulness—emerges that is not found in or reducible to the underlying physical base that produced it. In this sense, consciousness exists within and depends upon the brain. The second form, which we will call simply property dualism, argues that consciousness itself is immaterial and that its subject or bearer is also immaterial—whether described as a soul, mind, or self. Thus, unlike mere property dualism, this view necessarily entails substance dualism, since it locates both consciousness and its bearer beyond the physical.

What, then, is physicalism? The term itself is not easy to pin down, since, as noted earlier, several different positions fall under its umbrella, and it often refers simply to whatever version happens to be in vogue at a given time. Still, the concept can be made more precise. Historically, *materialism* referred to the belief that the only substances that exist are material ones. Yet this did not rule out the possibility that some material substances—such as living organisms—might also possess immaterial properties, or that immaterial abstract objects like sets or universals could exist. In contrast, physicalism today usually carries a more restrictive meaning. In its strict form, it holds that absolutely everything is a physical entity: all substances, properties, and events are nothing more than physical. Strict physicalists typically reject the existence of abstract objects, though some make exceptions. Other physicalists, however, maintain that while there are only physical substances, genuinely mental properties can emerge from and depend upon physical bases. This latter view is effectively a version of mere property dualism and will be treated as such in our discussion.

But what does it mean to call something a *physical* entity? The term can be understood in three different ways. First, physical may refer to whatever can be described in the language of physics and chemistry. Second, it can be extended to include anything accounted for by the physical sciences more broadly, such as biology. Third, it may be used in the commonsense sense of physical, covering primary qualities like shape, mass, size, and motion, while excluding secondary qualities like color, taste, smell, and sound that are tied to a single sense organ. In its restricted sense, then, physicalism asserts that all entities are physical in one of these ways.

For our purposes, we will use the first and most restrictive definition, taking “physical” to mean whatever can be described by physics and chemistry—that is, only configurations and hierarchies of elementary particles truly exist. This is the definition most often employed by physicalists, and it reflects the core motivation behind the

view: the conviction that science, especially the physical sciences, provides the ultimate explanation of reality. This confidence rests on two related claims. The unity of science asserts that, once fully developed, physics and chemistry would yield a complete and unified account of all phenomena, since the world is fundamentally a single physical system. The authority of science asserts either that only the hard sciences provide rational knowledge of the real world (a position known as strong scientism), or that while other disciplines may generate beliefs, the authority and reliability of science far surpass them.

From the standpoint of strict physicalism, a human being is nothing more than a physical entity. The only things that exist are physical substances, properties, and events. In the human case, this means the living body, or more specifically, the brain and central nervous system. The brain as a physical substance has measurable properties such as weight, volume, size, electrical activity, and chemical composition. Within the brain, physical events constantly occur: elongated cells known as neurons transmit impulses that account for its functioning.

Neurons communicate with one another through points of contact known as synapses. Among these, C fibers are a particular type of neuron that extend into the skin and transmit signals associated with pain. From the standpoint of physicalism, when a person experiences pain or entertains a thought, these are nothing more than physical events—instances of C fibers firing or electrical and chemical processes occurring within the brain and central nervous system. On this view, a human being is simply a physical organism, consisting of a brain and nervous system or a living body, which possesses physical properties and undergoes physical events.

But what exactly is matter? Surprisingly, there is no definitive answer, and our knowledge of matter's ultimate nature remains limited. Still, identifying examples is straightforward: computers, neurons, carbon atoms, and

billiard balls are all material objects. Physical properties, in turn, are those that belong exclusively to such physical objects. They include traits cataloged in physics and chemistry, such as hardness, spatial extension and motion, shape, chemical and electrical characteristics, magnetic and gravitational forces, density, mass, malleability, elasticity, and breakability. A physical event can then be described as the occurrence, continuation, or cessation of one or more of these properties in a physical substance—or among several substances—at a given time.

One important observation follows from this: material substances, properties, and events do not require consciousness in order to exist or be described. Nothing in the scientific accounts of physics or chemistry invokes consciousness as part of the definition of matter. A purely physical description of the world would be entirely devoid of any reference to, or characterization of, conscious experience.

Here, property and substance dualists part ways with physicalists. Both forms of dualism affirm that mental entities are real and that the mind and its contents are fundamentally nonphysical. Defining a mental entity is not easy, but several attempts have been made. Some suggest that a mental entity is something that could not exist in the absence of sentient beings. Others describe it as something a subject knows better than anyone else, or something to which the subject alone has direct, first-person access. Mental entities, then, belong to the private domain of inner experience.

Despite the difficulty of definition, examples are plentiful: the sensation of pain, the emotion of anger, the thought of lunch, the belief that two plus two equals four, or the desire for ice cream. In what follows, we will turn to a more detailed analysis of consciousness itself, followed by arguments supporting its irreducibly mental character.

A basic and uncontested principle of identity holds that if two entities, x and y, are identical, then whatever is true of x must also be true of y, and whatever is true of y must also be true of x. This is because x and y would not merely resemble each other but would in fact be the very same entity. Moreover, identity is not a contingent matter. Something does not merely happen to be identical with itself; rather, if x is identical with y, then it is necessarily so. It is metaphysically impossible for one to exist without the other, since they are by nature the same.

Physicalists are committed to the claim that what we call mental entities either do not exist at all or, if they do, are nothing more than physical entities. For example, they may argue that mental states are simply brain states, properties of the brain, bodily behaviors, or dispositions to behave. On this view, pain is not an inward sensation of hurtfulness but merely the disposition to cry out "ouch!" when pricked by a pin. If physicalism is correct, then everything true of the brain or the body—including its states, properties, and dispositions—must also be true of the mind, and everything true of the mind must likewise be true of the brain or body. Consequently, if we can identify even a single property or possibility that belongs to the mind but not the brain, or to the brain but not the mind, then physicalism collapses and some form of dualism is established.

It is important here to distinguish identity from other relations, such as causation or correlation. Brain events may indeed cause mental events, and mental events may in turn cause brain or bodily events. For example, certain electrical activity in the brain may give rise to the experience of pain, and the intention to raise one's arm may trigger the physical processes that result in movement. Similarly, it may be that every mental occurrence corresponds with some measurable neural activity. Yet causation and correlation do not amount to identity. A and B can be constantly connected without being the same thing. Consider the case of trilaterality (having three sides) and triangularity (having three angles). These properties are

inseparably linked—something trilateral is necessarily triangular—but the two properties are not identical.

For physicalism to hold, it is not sufficient that mental and physical states be causally connected or constantly correlated. Physicalism requires identity. If it can be shown that something is true—or even *possibly true*—of a mental substance, property, or event that is not true or possibly true of any physical substance, property, or event, then physicalism is false.

This forms the basis of a central dualist strategy: to demonstrate the non-identity of mental and physical states and of the self or soul with the brain or body. A further dualist strategy appeals to features of human existence that cannot be accounted for if we are nothing more than physical particulars. Among these features are our persistence of personal identity over time despite accidental changes, and our possession of libertarian free will. These realities are far more plausibly explained if we are immaterial selves or souls.

The nature of consciousness is, in many ways, straightforward. Imagine waking in the recovery room after surgery while still under the lingering effects of anesthesia. At first, faint sounds reach your ears, which gradually separate into two distinct voices. Soon you detect a dull ache in your ankle. The sharp smell of rubbing alcohol passes by, and it triggers a memory of a childhood accident. Along with that memory comes a feeling of aversion. You notice a thirst and a desire for a drink. Opening your eyes to a white ceiling, you begin to think about leaving the hospital. What is happening? Quite simply, you are regaining consciousness.

Two observations arise from this example. First, while any physical object, state, or process can be fully described from a third-person perspective, descriptions of conscious states require a first-person point of view. Second, states of consciousness are best defined ostensively—that is, by

pointing to particular examples. A workable definition is this: consciousness is what you are aware of when you engage in first-person introspection. Both of these observations align precisely with what dualism would predict.

Different features of consciousness can also be distinguished. One is phenomenal consciousness. Phenomenal properties, often called *qualia*, involve the raw feel or the "what-it-is-like" of being in a given state. There is a distinct what-it-is-like to feeling pain, tasting a lemon, hearing a musical note, or simply being yourself. Some philosophers attempt to limit phenomenal consciousness to sensations. It is true that the raw quality of a pain or a lemon's taste is more vivid than the feel of entertaining a thought—such as the thought that George Washington was the first U.S. president—or of holding a belief, such as that snow is white. Yet it would be far too narrow to restrict phenomenal consciousness in this way. If thoughts, beliefs, and desires lacked introspectively discernible differences, it would be impossible to know by introspection which thought or belief one was entertaining. But in fact, we do this constantly. For example, the thought about Washington and the thought about snow are distinguishable precisely because each carries a different "what-it-is-like" quality.

Another important feature is the epistemic subjectivity of consciousness, which includes three aspects. The first is direct access. My awareness of external objects—say, of water in its solid state—comes through sensations of those objects. But my awareness of my own conscious states, such as pain, is immediate and does not depend on a secondary awareness directed at that pain, though such higher-order reflection is possible. By simply being in pain, I am directly aware of it. For this reason, conscious properties are often called self-presenting. When I look at a red apple, the sensation of red presents both the apple's surface—the intentional object, indirectly given through the sensation—and the sensation of red itself, which is directly accessible to me. In contrast, no physical state or property is given in this way. Even my own brain states are

accessible only indirectly, either by reflection or by reading them off a monitor.

The second aspect is epistemic authority. Provided I am paying attention and not distracted, I know what is happening in my own conscious life with greater certainty than anyone else could. A neuroscientist may know more about my brain states than I do, but not about my mental states. One might imagine that, given advances in science, researchers could eventually determine my conscious states simply by reading my brain. Yet to produce a reliable correlation between brain states and conscious states, scientists must ask subjects to report their inner experiences while brain activity is recorded. Any correlation chart is therefore dependent on, and weaker than, the subject's own introspective knowledge.

The third aspect is private access. Knowledge of physical entities—rocks, chemicals, or brain states—is public in nature. Whatever means you use to discover their properties, I could use as well. If you measure an object's mass or length, I can replicate that measurement. Conscious states, however, are different. I have access to my own mental states by introspection in a way that no one else does. As Thomas Nagel has famously argued, even if we knew every physical fact about bats, we would still have no idea what it is like *to be* a bat. That subjective experience remains privately accessible to the bat alone.

Some philosophers argue that epistemic subjectivity, with its three features of direct access, epistemic authority, and private access, is merely epistemic in nature and has no ontological significance. On this view, such subjectivity does not establish that conscious states are irreducibly immaterial or distinct from brain states. Just as an apple can be known in two different ways—by sight or by touch—yet remains the same apple, so too, it is claimed, brain states can be known in two ways: through first-person introspection, marked by epistemic subjectivity, and through third-person neuroscientific description. But this,

they insist, does not imply that there are two entities—conscious states and brain states—but only two ways of knowing the same thing.

There are, however, strong reasons to reject this conclusion. First, it is doubtful that a "way of knowing" is itself a physical phenomenon. Ways of knowing involve intentionality (they are about something) and normativity (under certain conditions, one ought to accept what they disclose). Mere physical states of the brain exhibit neither of these. Second, the three features of epistemic subjectivity are best understood as ontological, not merely epistemic. If a person were nothing more than a physical object composed of brain states, these features could not be genuine, since they do not apply to physical states. They make sense only if conscious states are immaterial, for they reflect ways of relating to nonphysical realities.

A further feature of consciousness is point-of-view subjectivity. Every conscious state necessarily belongs to a subject; the very idea of a subjectless conscious state floating free is incoherent. Moreover, conscious states always occur from a particular perspective—they reflect the subject's unique vantage point on the world, shaping the way he or she experiences and thinks about reality.

Some philosophers, such as Lynne Rudder Baker, regard the first-person point of view as a property a person exemplifies. For example, Smith might be said to have the property of being-the-first-person-point-of-view. Yet this analysis is problematic for two reasons. First, if such a property exists, it would be what philosophers call an impure property, one that can only be defined by reference to a particular entity, such as "being identical to Socrates" or "being to the left of a desk." Such a property cannot constitute or individuate the entity it refers to, because it already presupposes its existence. In the same way, if Smith exemplifies being-the-first-person-point-of-view, that property presupposes the prior existence of Smith as a

person. Smith must already be ontologically present in order to have the property.

Kevin Corcoran shares Baker's view of the central role of the first-person perspective in personhood, noting that only persons exemplify it. But his own point strengthens the objection: if persons *have* this property, they must exist prior to exemplifying it, just as an apple must exist before it can exemplify being red. It follows that being-the-first-person-perspective cannot constitute personhood, since it presupposes the prior existence of persons who exemplify it.

A second problem is that there may be no such property at all. The first-person perspective is better understood not as a property that persons have but as what persons *are*. One can analyze it reductively as follows: S has a first-person perspective if S is a sentient, personal kind of substance with the characteristic properties and potentialities of persons, such as self-awareness. In other words, persons are substantial, unified centers of consciousness. They exemplify ordinary mental properties—having a thought, experiencing red, feeling pain—but they do not exemplify an additional property of being-a-first-person-perspective. That phrase simply describes the fact that a substantial, sentient person, in virtue of having ordinary mental states, already possesses a perspective. No further property is required.

So far, we have offered an ostensive definition of consciousness and described several of its features. Philosophers also distinguish between two kinds of consciousness: phenomenal and access. Phenomenal consciousness refers to the raw qualitative character of experience, the "what-it-is-like" of a state. Access consciousness, by contrast, refers to those states available for guiding speech, directing action, or being used in reasoning. It is possible to have phenomenal consciousness without access consciousness. For instance, imagine looking at a chart filled with numbers. You have a vivid

awareness of the chart—phenomenal consciousness—but you may not be able to recall or report each number, reproduce the chart from memory, or use the numbers in reasoning. In such a case, you have phenomenal consciousness without access consciousness.

Some suggest the reverse is also possible: access without phenomenal consciousness. Cases of blindsight illustrate this possibility. Patients with blindsight have blind spots in their visual fields. They report no awareness of objects placed within those blind spots, yet when asked to identify the shapes of such objects, they do so with statistically significant accuracy. This has led to two competing interpretations. One holds that the subjects have no phenomenal consciousness of the objects at all, but neural pathways still process the stimuli and trigger accurate reports. The other maintains that the subjects do possess first-order awareness of the objects, but a defect prevents them from achieving second-order awareness—that is, awareness of being aware. On this interpretation, they are conscious of the objects but not conscious of their own consciousness of them.

Finally, philosophers identify at least five major kinds of conscious states, all of which involve phenomenal consciousness. Sensations are basic states of awareness, such as hearing a sound or feeling pain, and emotions are a subclass of these, such as being aware of something in an angry way. Thoughts are mental contents expressible in full propositions and capable of logical relations: some entail others, while others merely provide evidential support. Beliefs are a person's considered judgments, held with varying degrees of confidence, about how things really are. Desires are felt inclinations toward or away from certain states of affairs. And acts of will are choices—exercises of agency—typically directed toward achieving some purpose.

A central issue in the philosophy of mind is whether properties such as being in pain or having a thought—and the states or events composed of them, such as an episode

of pain or an act of thinking—are genuinely mental or reducible to the physical. The position known as property dualism, or mere-property dualism, holds that conscious properties and events are irreducibly mental rather than physical. To follow this argument, recall the law of identity: if x is identical to y, then whatever is true of x must also be true of y, and vice versa. If even a single feature can be found that is true, or even possibly true, of x but not of y, then x and y cannot be identical, even if one depends upon the other for its functioning.

Property dualists argue that mental states cannot be physical because they display features absent in physical states:

(a) Mental states have a raw qualitative character, a "what-it-is-like" quality—for instance, the felt hurt of pain.

(b) Many mental states possess intentionality: they are inherently *of* or *about* something beyond themselves.

(c) Mental states are inner, private, and immediately accessible only to the subject who experiences them.

(d) Mental states require a subjective ontology, meaning they necessarily belong to the sentient beings who have them.

(e) Mental states lack defining features of physical states, such as spatial extension, determinate location, or structural composition

out of parts, and they cannot be exhaustively described in physical language.

From these premises, property dualists conclude that mental states are fundamentally nonphysical in nature, even if they depend on the brain for their operation.

Once consciousness is accurately described, it becomes evident that mental properties and events are not identical with physical properties and events. Mental states are defined by their intrinsic, subjective, inner, and private qualities, directly accessible to the subject through first-person introspection. There is a distinctive *what-it-is-like* to experiencing pain, to feeling pleasure, or to entertaining a thought about George Washington. By contrast, there is no *what-it-is-like* to being an electron, a neuron, or a pattern of synaptic firing—or to any physical state at all. Moreover, while brain states may be described in terms of their causal or functional relation to mental states, they can also be fully and intrinsically characterized in physical language. Mental states, however, cannot be intrinsically captured in physical terms.

As argued earlier, mental states also connect uniquely to the three features of epistemic subjectivity: direct access, epistemic authority, and private access. These features make sense only if consciousness is immaterial. Physical states, such as brain events, must always be accessed indirectly, and because they are public in nature, they cannot sustain the notions of epistemic authority or private access.

Further differences reinforce this conclusion. Certain sensations are pleasurable or unpleasant, but physical states themselves possess no such qualities. A cut on the knee is not unpleasant in itself; the unpleasantness belongs to the pain it causes. Mental states can also have the property of familiarity—such as when a desk looks familiar—but familiarity is not a trait of any physical configuration. Consider pain again. When one experiences pain, C fibers

in the nervous system may be firing. This firing is a highly complex structural property involving countless atoms, molecules, and neurons organized in intricate geometrical arrangements and patterns of synaptic activity. By contrast, the property of being a pain is simple, not a composite of many parts arranged in structure.

These contrasts show that mental states cannot be identical with physical states. Physicalists have often responded by denying that consciousness has such features. For instance, dualists argue that thoughts lack geometrical properties like size, shape, and location, even though the brain events correlated with them clearly do. Physicalists counter that thoughts are located in specific regions of the brain. But there is little reason to accept this claim. Dualists can account for spatial factors entirely in terms of the brain events causally associated with thoughts. It is those neural events that possess size, shape, and location—properties that can even be projected on a computer screen. The thoughts themselves do not have spatial dimensions. Indeed, it seems to commit a category error to ask about the shape or size of one's thought of George Washington, or whether that thought is closer to one's left ear than one's thought of snow. Introspection tells us much about the features of our thoughts, but spatial location is not among them. Dualists extend this kind of response to other attempts by physicalists to explain away the distinctive features of consciousness.

A second major argument for property or event dualism is the **knowledge argument**, developed in different forms by Thomas Nagel, Frank Jackson (who later abandoned it for reasons that, we believe, are unconvincing), and Saul Kripke. The standard thought experiment is this: Mary, a brilliant scientist blind from birth, possesses exhaustive knowledge of all the physical facts relevant to perception. When she suddenly gains sight, however, she acquires new knowledge—facts she did not and could not know before. Since she already knew every physical fact, and since she nonetheless learns something new, what she learns cannot

be physical. Rather, the new knowledge must concern mental facts.

To grasp the force of this argument, we must focus on the nature of self-presenting properties and three distinct forms of knowledge. A self-presenting property, such as being-an-appearing-of-red, reveals both its intentional object (for example, a red apple) and itself to the subject experiencing it. When someone perceives an apple, he is aware not only of the apple but also of the experience of seeing the apple. Regarding knowledge, philosophers commonly distinguish three irreducible forms, though one can serve as the epistemic ground for another. (1) **Knowledge by acquaintance** is direct awareness of something—for instance, seeing an apple before you and thereby knowing it directly, without needing the concept or the word *apple*. (2) **Propositional knowledge** is knowledge that a given proposition is true, such as knowing that "the object before me is an apple." This requires having the concept of an apple and recognizing that the object fits that concept. (3) **Know-how** is the ability to perform certain actions, such as using apples in cooking. In general, acquaintance grounds propositional knowledge, which in turn enables genuine know-how: it is because I see the apple that I know it is an apple, and because I know what an apple is that I can use it skillfully.

Applied to Mary's case, when she first experiences the self-presenting property of redness—when she has the sensation of red—she acquires six new forms of knowledge. With respect both to the color red and to her sensation of red, she gains acquaintance, propositional knowledge, and know-how. She now knows redness by acquaintance; upon reflection, she can form propositions such as "Necessarily, red is a color." She gains practical skill as well: the ability to compare and sort objects by color, to design aesthetically pleasing color patterns, and more. If we assume a realist dualist account of secondary qualities—colors, sounds, tastes, smells, textures—then objects truly possess these features. A tree falling in a forest, even with no one present, makes a sound. On this realist construal, Mary's new

knowledge is not itself knowledge *of* mental facts but forms of knowledge accessible only through mental states that exemplify the relevant self-presenting property. One must actually have the sensation of red in order to acquire these forms of knowledge about redness.

In addition, Mary gains knowledge of her own sensation of red. She becomes directly aware, for the first time, of what it is like to have that sensation, and she can further recognize it as pleasurable, faint, or vivid. She acquires propositional knowledge about her sensations: for example, that a sensation of red is more similar to orange than to sourness, or that the apple now looks more vivid than the orange did yesterday under dim light. She also develops skill regarding her sensations—recalling them in memory, imagining them afresh, or adjusting her glasses to sharpen their vividness. In this way, Mary's new experience provides a wide range of knowledge that could not be obtained from physical information alone.

Physicalists such as David Papineau and Paul Churchland have put forward slightly different versions of the most prominent response to the knowledge argument. On their account, when Mary first sees red, she does not acquire knowledge of any new facts. Instead, she acquires new abilities, new behavioral dispositions, new skills, and new ways of accessing facts she already knew. Before regaining sight, Mary already possessed complete knowledge of all the physical facts relevant to what-it-is-like to experience red. She could describe, in third-person terms, what another person's experience of red would be like. Since experiences of red are simply physical states of the brain, and Mary already had mastery of the relevant physical theory, she knew what it is like to see red in principle. What changes is that she now acquires a prelinguistic representation of redness, a first-person ability to imagine red or reproduce the experience in memory. She can now recognize, reidentify, and classify her own experiences of red by means of a new inner capacity for introspection. Whereas before she could only identify red "from the outside" by observing others' behavior, she now does so directly "from

the inside." On this view, then, Mary acquires a new kind of knowledge—know-how or ability—but not knowledge of new facts. The physicalist thus allows for a duality of kinds of knowledge but not for a duality of facts.

This response, however, is inadequate for at least three reasons. First, it is simply false to say that Mary merely gains a new way of knowing what she already knew. As noted earlier, Mary acquires factual knowledge she did not previously possess. It is difficult to deny that she learns something new about the world itself, not just about how to access or represent what she already knew.

Second, this response seems to rely on a coarse-grained theory of properties, according to which two properties are considered identical if they are always coexemplified, whether contingently or necessarily. Thus the property of being-an-appearing-of-red can be identified with the property of being brain state A, since they occur together. But this account is untenable. Being triangular and being trilateral, for example, are distinct properties even though they are necessarily coexemplified. Similarly, certain unexemplified properties, such as being a unicorn or being a Vulcan, and even unexemplifiable properties, such as being a square circle, are distinct properties despite being coexemplified by no objects at all. If the coarse-grained theory were correct, these would all collapse into sameness, which is absurd.

Third, Papineau and Churchland's own description of Mary's new know-how tacitly borrows concepts that are, in fact, deeply dualistic. They speak of *prelinguistic representation*, *mental imagery*, and *first-person introspection*. These notions are not reducible to the vocabulary of physicalism. Indeed, they serve as the real intuition pumps behind the physicalist rejoinder. If one strips away the dualist language and attempts to reframe their explanation entirely in physicalist terms, the argument loses its force and appears implausible.

The third argument for property or event dualism rests on intentionality. Some, and perhaps all, mental states exhibit intentionality, while no physical state does. Therefore, at least some mental states must be nonphysical. Intentionality refers to the "ofness" or "aboutness" of mental states. Consider the following facts:

1. When one introspectively attends to one's own conscious states, no sense data are associated with those states (a thought, for example, has no color). Physical states, however, do possess sense data (a brain state may be gray).
2. Intentionality is completely unrestricted in its possible objects: any entity whatsoever may be the object of a mental act. By contrast, physical relations obtain only among a limited range of entities (e.g., a magnetic field attracts only certain materials).
3. To grasp a mental act requires a reflexive act of self-awareness, whereas no such reflexivity is needed to grasp a physical relation.
4. In ordinary physical relations (e.g., *x* is to the left of *y*), the relata are identifiable objects independently of their relation. A desk and a lamp could exist without being positioned to the left or right of each other. By contrast, intentional contents are partly constituted by their object: one and the same belief cannot be about a frog and later about a house; its identity is fixed by its intentional content.
5. Physical relations require the existence of all relata (*x* and *y* must both exist for one to be on top of the other). Intentionality, however, can be directed at nonexistent objects (e.g., one can think about Zeus).

Many physicalists, particularly functionalists, attempt to reduce intentionality to causal or functional relations. They analyze mental states in terms of bodily inputs, behavioral outputs, and causal links to other mental states. On this account, a pain is not an intrinsically qualitative state

characterized by hurtfulness, but rather a functional kind: the state produced by pinpricks and related to grimacing, saying "ouch," and desiring relief. The desire for pity, in turn, is defined in terms of further behavioral and mental outputs. By this reasoning, even an inanimate computer could be said to be "conscious"—in pain or having a thought—so long as it produced the right outputs when given the right inputs.

Dualists challenge this view with thought experiments that distinguish causal/functional relations from genuine intentionality. John Searle's well-known "Chinese room" argument illustrates the point:

"Imagine that you are locked in a room, and in this room are several baskets full of Chinese symbols. Imagine that you (like me) do not understand a word of Chinese, but that you are given a rule book in English for manipulating the Chinese symbols. The rules specify the manipulations of symbols purely formally, in terms of their syntax, not their semantics. So the rule might say: "Take a squiggle-squiggle out of basket number one and put it next to a squoggle-squoggle sign from basket number two." Now suppose that some other Chinese symbols are passed into the room, and that you are given further rules for passing back Chinese symbols out of the room. Suppose that unknown to you the symbols passed into the room are called "questions" by the people outside the room, and the symbols you pass back out of the room are called "answers to the questions." Suppose, furthermore, that the programmers are so good at designing the programs and that you are so good at manipulating the symbols, that very soon your answers are indistinguishable from those of a native Chinese speaker. There you are locked in your room shuffling your Chinese symbols and passing out Chinese

symbols in response to incoming Chinese symbols. . . . Now the point of the story is simply this: by virtue of implementing a formal computer program from the point of view of an outside observer, you behave exactly as if you understood Chinese, but all the same you don't understand a word of Chinese."

The Chinese room simulates a computer from the perspective of an outside observer, who sees inputs and outputs arranged to mimic understanding. Yet the person in the room has no comprehension of Chinese. In the same way, computers do not genuinely understand or possess intentionality; they merely imitate the operations of a mind.

We have thus seen compelling reasons to affirm property dualism: consciousness and conscious states are genuinely mental, not reducible to the physical. We now turn to consider some of the central arguments against this position.

A number of objections have been raised against dualism, and we will consider three of them along with brief responses. The first objection is that, on a dualist view, mind and body are so radically different that it seems impossible to explain how and where the two interact. How could a soul, lacking all physical properties, act upon the body, or how could the body act upon the soul? How could the soul move the arm, or how could a pin stuck in the finger cause pain in the soul?

The response to this objection begins with the recognition that it assumes a problematic principle: namely, that if we do not know how A causes B, then it is unreasonable to believe A causes B—especially if A and B are different. But this is not a sound assumption. We often know that one thing causes another without understanding how causation occurs, even when the items involved are very different. Consider examples: it is conceivable that God, if he exists, could create or act upon the world, despite being radically

different from it. Magnetic fields move tacks, gravity influences planets millions of miles away, and protons exert repulsive forces on each other. In such cases, causal interaction between different kinds of entities occurs even though we do not fully understand how. Furthermore, the causes often differ in nature from their effects, as in the case of fields and forces acting on solid, spatially located particles.

When it comes to mind and body, we are directly aware of causal interaction between them. Bodily events such as being pricked with a pin or suffering a head injury cause mental events such as pain or memory loss, while mental states cause bodily changes such as ulcers from worry or the intentional raising of an arm. The evidence for causal interaction between mind and body is so immediate and pervasive that there is no compelling reason to doubt it. Moreover, the demand for an explanation of "how" mind and body interact may be misplaced. To ask how A causes B is typically to ask for an intervening mechanism between them. For example, one can ask how turning a key starts a car because there is an electrical system connecting the two. But mental causation may be direct and immediate, with no intervening mechanism to describe. If so, the "how" question does not apply.

Another version of the objection claims that mental causation would require the creation of new energy in the brain or body, thereby violating the first law of conservation of mass and energy. Three replies can be made. First, the conservation law is not a metaphysical truth that rules out the possibility of new energy; it is a scientific, heuristic principle used for guiding research. Moreover, it applies only to closed systems—those not subject to outside influence. But it begs the question to assume that the brain is a closed system, since the dualist position is precisely that it is open to causal influence from immaterial minds. Second, the energy involved in mental causation may be so small as to be nearly undetectable. Consider the Hoover Dam: the energy required to flip the switch that releases the water is negligible compared to the

torrent of energy unleashed by the water itself. Mental causation may be like flipping such a switch, redirecting potential energy already present in the brain rather than creating substantial new energy. Third, quantum entanglement demonstrates that causal influence can occur without the transfer of energy. When two particles are entangled, a measurement on one determines the state of the other, even across vast distances, without any exchange of energy. Mental causation may operate in a similar way.

A final form of the interaction objection appeals to the principle of the causal closure of the physical: if one traces the causal antecedents of any physical event, one need never appeal to anything outside the physical domain. On this view, only physical causes are required for physical effects. Yet this principle, too, is not a metaphysical law but merely a pragmatic assumption employed in scientific practice. There is no empirical evidence that it is an inviolable truth. Moreover, if mental states are real—as we have argued—then strict adherence to closure would imply that mental states are epiphenomenal: they are caused by the brain but exert no causal influence of their own. On this account, thirst would not cause someone to get a drink; rather, the brain state alone would. This is implausible. Worse still, epiphenomenalism appears to be self-refuting. It asserts that no propositional content in thoughts or beliefs plays a causal role in reasoning or persuasion. If true, then people are determined by nonrational physical processes alone, and no one accepts or rejects propositions on the basis of rational reflection. But in that case, presenting the argument for epiphenomenalism in order to persuade others of its truth would be pointless and self-defeating.

A second objection to dualism appeals to Ockham's razor. This principle holds that one should not multiply entities beyond what is necessary to explain a phenomenon. When two explanations account for the same thing, the simpler one—the one that posits fewer entities or kinds of entities—should be preferred. Physicalism, it is argued, is simpler than dualism because it posits only one kind of entity, matter, to explain human beings, whereas dualism

requires two kinds, matter and mind. Thus, by the standard of Ockham's razor, physicalism is to be preferred.

The response to this objection highlights two problems with its application. First, if Ockham's razor is understood in its commonsense form—that an explanation should include only what is necessary to account for the phenomenon—then the principle is uncontroversial. But when applied to the mind-body problem, it becomes question-begging. The dualist appeals precisely to phenomena that physicalism cannot adequately explain, such as consciousness, intentionality, and the first-person perspective. From the dualist standpoint, invoking both mind and matter is not an unnecessary multiplication but a faithful recognition of what is required to account for the facts.

Second, if Ockham's razor is used to shift the burden of proof onto the dualist, the tables may in fact be turned. From first-person awareness, individuals have direct, incorrigible knowledge of their own mental states and private access to them in a way that does not apply to physical states. In light of this, one has stronger grounds for affirming the existence of genuine mental states than for affirming the truth of physicalism. Thus, the burden of proof may rest with the physicalist. More importantly, Ockham's razor functions only as a tiebreaker, applicable when competing theories are otherwise equal. Since the dualist rejects the claim that dualism and physicalism stand on equal explanatory footing, the principle cannot by itself decide the matter.

A third objection is scientific in nature. It suggests that while dualism cannot be disproven outright, scientific evidence makes it highly improbable. Nancey Murphy, for instance, argues that physicalism is not merely a philosophical thesis but the core commitment of modern scientific research, supported by substantial evidence. According to her, biology, neuroscience, and cognitive science have provided explanations of the dependence of mental faculties—once attributed to the soul—on physical

processes. While dualism could always appeal to correlations or functional relations between soul and body, advances in science, she claims, have made it a largely unnecessary hypothesis. As Murphy puts it, science has accumulated overwhelming evidence showing that we do not need to postulate an immaterial soul or mind in order to explain life and consciousness.

The response to this objection points out two problems. First, people do not postulate the existence of conscious states in order to explain behavior, in a way that might be discarded once a better (physicalist) explanation becomes available. Rather, people are directly aware of their conscious states and report them on the basis of what they introspectively know. Consciousness is not a theoretical entity invented for explanatory purposes but an immediately given reality. Second, the claim that neuroscience is the most authoritative discipline for resolving mind-body questions is difficult to defend. Scientific research is limited to describing correlations between mental and physical events; it does not and cannot address the deeper questions about the nature of thought, feeling, or belief, or about the identity of the self. Even if mental states depend on specific brain regions—a claim for which there is also evidence in the other direction—a dualist can readily explain such dependence as correlation or causation without reducing mental states to brain states. The central issues are fundamentally philosophical and cannot be settled by empirical data alone.

This can be illustrated by the example of mirror neurons. Studies have shown that when these neurons are damaged, a person cannot feel empathy for others. How should we interpret this? Here the notion of *empirically equivalent theories* is useful. Two or more theories are empirically equivalent if they are consistent with exactly the same set of observations, in which case no empirical evidence can decide between them. At least three interpretations of the mirror neuron findings are empirically equivalent: (1) strict physicalism, which claims that empathy is identical to the firings of mirror neurons; (2) mere-property dualism, which

views empathy as an irreducible state of consciousness whose occurrence depends on the firing of mirror neurons; and (3) substance dualism, which holds that empathy is an irreducible state of consciousness in the soul that, while embodied, depends on mirror neuron activity. Since the data support all three equally, empirical science alone cannot settle the matter. Nor does an appeal to simplicity help, for simplicity functions only as a tiebreaker when theories are otherwise equal. The substance dualist will maintain that, once the broader philosophical arguments are considered, dualism is better supported than its competitors.

Consider a new argument. The argument can be stated as follows:

1. If I were a physical object (such as a brain or a body), then a third-person physical description would capture all the facts that are true of me.
2. But a third-person physical description does not capture all the facts that are true of me.
3. Therefore, I am not a physical object.
4. I am either a physical object or a soul.
5. Therefore, I am a soul.

A complete physical description of the world would be one that exhaustively details all objects, properties, and processes from a third-person point of view, including their spatiotemporal locations. For example, to describe an apple in a room, one might say that there exists an object three feet from the south wall and two feet from the east wall, and that the object has properties such as being red, round, and sweet.

By contrast, the first-person point of view describes the world from my own perspective. It relies on indexicals such as *I*, *here*, *now*, *there*, and *then*. *Here* and *now* refer to where and when I am; *there* and *then* designate where and when I am not. The most fundamental of these indexicals is *I*, which refers to myself—the self I know immediately

through acts of self-awareness. In using *I*, I refer not to an external description but to myself as the conscious, reflexive subject who owns my body and mental states.

Physicalism, at least in its widely accepted forms, denies that there are irreducible or privileged first-person perspectives. On this view, everything about me can be fully described in third-person object language. A physicalist description might say: "There exists a body at a specific location that is five feet eight inches tall and weighs 160 pounds." A mere-property dualist might extend the description to include states such as: "This body is feeling pain" or "thinking about lunch."

Yet no collection of third-person descriptions captures my subjective, first-person acquaintance with myself. For any set of such descriptions, it always remains an open question whether the individual described is identical with the "I" that I know myself to be. I do not know myself by first compiling a third-person description of mental and physical properties and then recognizing that someone—namely, me—satisfies that description. Rather, I know myself directly through immediate acquaintance in acts of self-awareness, and I can express that knowledge by using the term *I*.

The indexical *I* refers not to a body, not to mental properties, nor to any bundle of such properties described in third-person terms. Instead, it refers to my substantial self, the soul. Through self-awareness, I know that *I* denotes the uncomposed subject who possesses both my mental states and my body. Thus, the first-person perspective testifies to the reality of the soul as the true referent of *I*.

Finally, the modal argument for the soul can be summarized in five steps:

1. I am possibly disembodied (I could survive without my brain or body).
2. Neither my brain nor my body is possibly disembodied (they could not exist without being physical).
3. Therefore, I am not my brain or body.
4. I am either a soul or a brain or a body.
5. Therefore, I am a soul.

The most debated premise is (1). To defend it, philosophers have generally taken two approaches. Stewart Goetz, for example, appeals to the *simple argument*: I am immediately aware of myself as a simple, unified substance, whereas I am also aware of my body as a complex, divisible thing. This epistemic awareness supports the possibility that I exist independently of my body. In the absence of any defeaters, such awareness is sufficient to affirm that I could exist disembodied. Charles Taliaferro, on the other hand, appeals to common modal intuitions. Most people can readily conceive of themselves surviving without their bodies, and this widespread intuition provides strong prima facie support for the possibility of disembodiment.

Remarkably, this intuition is reinforced by a growing body of empirical evidence in the form of near-death experiences (NDEs). Far from being rare, NDEs occur with notable frequency. A Gallup poll and other studies report that approximately 4 percent of both Germans and Americans—roughly one in twenty-five—have had such an experience. This amounts to nine to twelve million Americans and as many as 200 to 300 million people worldwide. The core features of NDEs are strikingly consistent across cultures and religions, with parallels even in accounts from the ancient Near East. More than nine hundred scholarly articles have been published on the subject, and many researchers began their work as skeptics. The evidence they uncovered, however, has often persuaded them of the authenticity of these experiences.

The details of NDEs are compelling. For instance, young children who know nothing of heaven or the afterlife report learning verifiable information during these episodes. In so-called evidential cases, experiencers report facts they could not have otherwise known, and these are independently confirmed. One striking case involved a woman who died during surgery and reported meeting her father, who told her he had just died and explained how it happened. At the time, her family in the waiting room insisted he was alive. Only later did phone calls confirm that he had indeed died exactly as described—at the very time she reported seeing him.

In another case, a young girl named Katie drowned and was clinically dead for three days. During that time, she reported being guided by an angel, meeting Jesus, and even visiting her family home. She described in vivid detail what each family member was doing, what they were wearing, and even what her mother was cooking. After her recovery, the shocked family confirmed every detail. Similar cases include Maria at Harborview Hospital, who reported a shoe on a window ledge that was later found exactly as she described, and a comatose man who accurately recounted where a nurse had placed his dentures while he hovered above the room watching. In yet another study, cardiologist Michael Sabom documented cardiac arrest patients who described their resuscitations with astonishing accuracy, despite being clinically unconscious. By contrast, patients without NDEs made frequent errors when asked to describe resuscitation procedures.

Even more striking are cases of people born blind who gain temporary sight during NDEs, describing their surroundings with accuracy before returning to blindness upon regaining consciousness. Across cultures and age groups—including atheists and very young children—the reports are consistent. People experience heightened consciousness when, by all physical measures, no consciousness should exist. These experiences frequently bring about profound life changes.

Physicalists object that the modal argument shows only epistemic or conceptual possibility, not true metaphysical possibility. For all we know, they claim, disembodiment might *seem* conceivable but still be impossible. Yet this objection simply assumes physicalism from the outset and so begs the question. The coherence of NDE reports, their independent verification, and their widespread consistency strongly suggest not merely conceptual but metaphysical possibility. If even one case of disembodied existence is credible, then premise (1) is vindicated. And if premise (1) holds, the modal argument provides powerful support for substance dualism: we are not reducible to our brains or bodies, but are, in fact, *souls.*

Epilogue – Becoming from Being: How Metaphysics Fuels Mindset

The journey we have undertaken is not a mere intellectual exercise; it is a fundamental re-calibration of reality itself. To conclude that existence is grounded in a Necessary, Conscious Mind who has acted decisively within human history is not to solve a final crossword puzzle, but to be handed the cipher for everything that follows. This conclusion is not an inert fact to be stored on a mental shelf. It is a live, generative power source, a metaphysical engine capable of fueling a mindset so robust, so resilient, that it can rightly be called *indomitable*. For what we believe about ultimate reality—about *Being*—determines everything about what we can *become*. If the universe is a story, then discovering you are a part of that story changes how you walk, how you work, and how you withstand the storms. It is here, at the intersection of metaphysics and mindset, that *The Universal Plan* becomes deeply personal, justifying a spirit of unconquerable hope, relentless perseverance, intelligent optimism, and profound resilience.

Consider **hope**. In a world assumed to be a cosmic accident, hope is little more than a psychological coping mechanism, a whistle in the dark against the encroaching silence of the void. It is a subjective preference imposed upon an indifferent reality. But if reality itself is anchored in a transcendent Mind whose character has been revealed in the conquest of death, hope is transformed. It ceases to be a wish and becomes a rational expectation. The resurrection of Jesus is not a mythic metaphor; it is the historical proof-of-concept that the deepest truth of the universe is not decay, but renewal; not despair, but redemption. This hope is not fragile. It is anchored in the very nature of Being, in the character of the One who is both the ground of existence and the victor over the grave. To hope, then, is not to ignore the darkness; it is to know, with justified confidence, that the light has already won and that the dawn is an inevitability written into the fabric of the cosmos.

This rationally grounded hope becomes the fuel for **perseverance** and **resilience**. To persevere is to continue in a course of action despite difficulty or with little prospect of success. But in a universe with a Plan, the prospect of ultimate success is guaranteed. Our lives are not random, disconnected events; they are threads woven into a divine tapestry whose final pattern is one of redemption. This knowledge imbues our struggles with meaning. Suffering is no longer a meaningless wound inflicted by a chaotic world; it is a profound, albeit painful, part of a story that ends in triumph. This is the very engine of resilience. The ability to bounce back from adversity is not just a matter of psychological grit; it is the art of drawing strength from a deeper reality. When we fall, we know that the ground holding us up is the hand of a Creator who has promised that our momentary afflictions are preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison. We are not merely surviving; we are being forged.

From this soil grows a profound and intelligent **optimism**. This is not the shallow optimism that ignores pain, but the deep, clear-eyed optimism that sees through it to the ultimate reality. If the resurrection is the central event of history, then we have already seen the trailer for how the movie ends. It ends with life conquering death, with love conquering hate, and with God setting all things right. This is not a guess; it is an inference from the best available evidence. This worldview allows us to look upon the horrors of the world, to grieve them honestly, but to never grant them the final word. The arc of the moral universe is long, but we have been shown that it bends, definitively, toward justice and redemption. Optimism, therefore, is not a personality trait; it is a metaphysical commitment, a rational stance toward a future guaranteed by the One who holds all of history in His hands.

This framework also provides the ultimate justification for a **growth mindset**. A fixed mindset—the belief that one's qualities are carved in stone—is a natural corollary of a physicalist worldview in which you are nothing more than a complex collection of particles, a biological machine

whose capacities are determined and limited. But if you are an immaterial soul, a conscious self created in the image of an infinite and omniscient Mind, your potential for growth is boundless. Your life is not about proving your fixed worth but about becoming more like the source of all truth, goodness, and beauty. This shatters the fear of failure, for every mistake becomes an opportunity for learning and development. It transforms intellectual and moral development from a burden into a joyous adventure of aligning yourself more closely with the grain of reality. You are not a finished product; you are a work in progress, with an infinite horizon for growth before you.

To illustrate this spirit, it is instructive to consider an unlikely but illuminating example from contemporary culture: *Son Goku*, the protagonist of the Japanese manga and anime series *Dragon Ball*. Goku embodies what might be called a "fictional parable" of the indomitable spirit. His defining trait is not merely his prodigious strength but his relentless drive to grow, to overcome, and to rise even after defeat. No matter how formidable the adversary, no matter how many times he is struck down, he rises with renewed determination. His setbacks become the very fuel for his future strength.

While few humans exhibit motivation at this extraordinary level, the figure of Goku captures the imagination precisely because it resonates with something deeply human: the longing to transcend limitations, to continually become more than one is. Yet within the metaphysical framework we have outlined, the drive exemplified in this fictional character is not only admirable but rationally justified. If the universe is purposive, if Being itself is good and creative, if the human soul reflects the image of an infinite Mind, then the human vocation is indeed to grow endlessly, to persevere without surrender, and to rise each time stronger than before. In fact, our justification for resilience and perseverance is greater than Goku's, for ours is grounded not in fiction but in reality itself—in the character of a Creator who has conquered death and guaranteed redemption. Thus, while Goku's indomitable spirit inspires

through narrative, the believer's indomitable spirit is not symbolic but existentially warranted.

This same principle provides the supreme **motivation for the acquisition of knowledge**. If the universe is the product of an infinite Intellect, then every discovery in science, every insight in philosophy, and every lesson from history is a chance to trace the thoughts of God. To study the laws of physics is to admire the mathematical elegance of the Creator. To learn a new language is to appreciate the gift of communication He instilled in us. To understand history is to witness His providential hand ultimately guiding the story. In this light, studying is not a chore to be completed for a grade; it is an act of communion, a form of worship, a way of drawing closer to the Mind behind all things.

It is this total vision of reality that makes possible a genuinely **indomitable spirit**, a soul that cannot be conquered by suffering because it knows, with bone-deep certainty, that suffering is not the ultimate reality. Let us imagine a man named Aton. For 120 years, Aton lives a life of almost unimaginable hardship. Like Job, he is a good man, yet he loses his family to disease, his wealth to disaster, and his health to a painful, lingering illness. His friends mock him, his society shuns him, and he is left in utter desolation. Every day for over a century is a trial of pain, loneliness, and grief. From the outside, his life is a portrait of gratuitous, meaningless agony. Yet Aton holds fast. He holds fast not to a blind hope, but to a reasoned trust in the hope of the God revealed in the empty tomb. He knows that his story is but one chapter in a much larger book. Then, after 120 years, Aton dies. He awakens not into nothingness, but into the arms of the God he trusted. He is reunited with the loved ones he lost. He meets the saints and heroes of history, and countless new souls who become his eternal family. His 120 years of suffering, once an all-consuming reality, are now seen in their true perspective. He lives in this state of joy for a hundred years, and his former pain is a distant memory. He is there for a thousand years, and the memory becomes a faint

whisper. He is there for a million years, a billion, a trillion. He is there for a googolplex of years, and the 120 years of sorrow have shrunk to an infinitesimal speck, a single, forgotten tear that was wiped away on the first morning of an everlasting joy that will never, ever fade. His suffering was real, but it was not ultimate. It was a fleeting, momentary affliction that prepared him for an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison. Aton's spirit was indomitable not because he was strong, but because his foundation was. He was anchored in the unshakable truth that the universe is not a tragedy, but a divine comedy whose final act is reunion, redemption, and eternal fellowship with the source of all love. This is the power of a mindset fueled by metaphysics. It tells us that our lives are not defined by our scars, but by the One who heals them. It assures us that our hope is not a fantasy, but the most reasonable thing in the world. It invites us, no matter our circumstances, to live with courage, with joy, and with a spirit that cannot be broken, for we are, each of us, a vital part of *The Universal Plan*.